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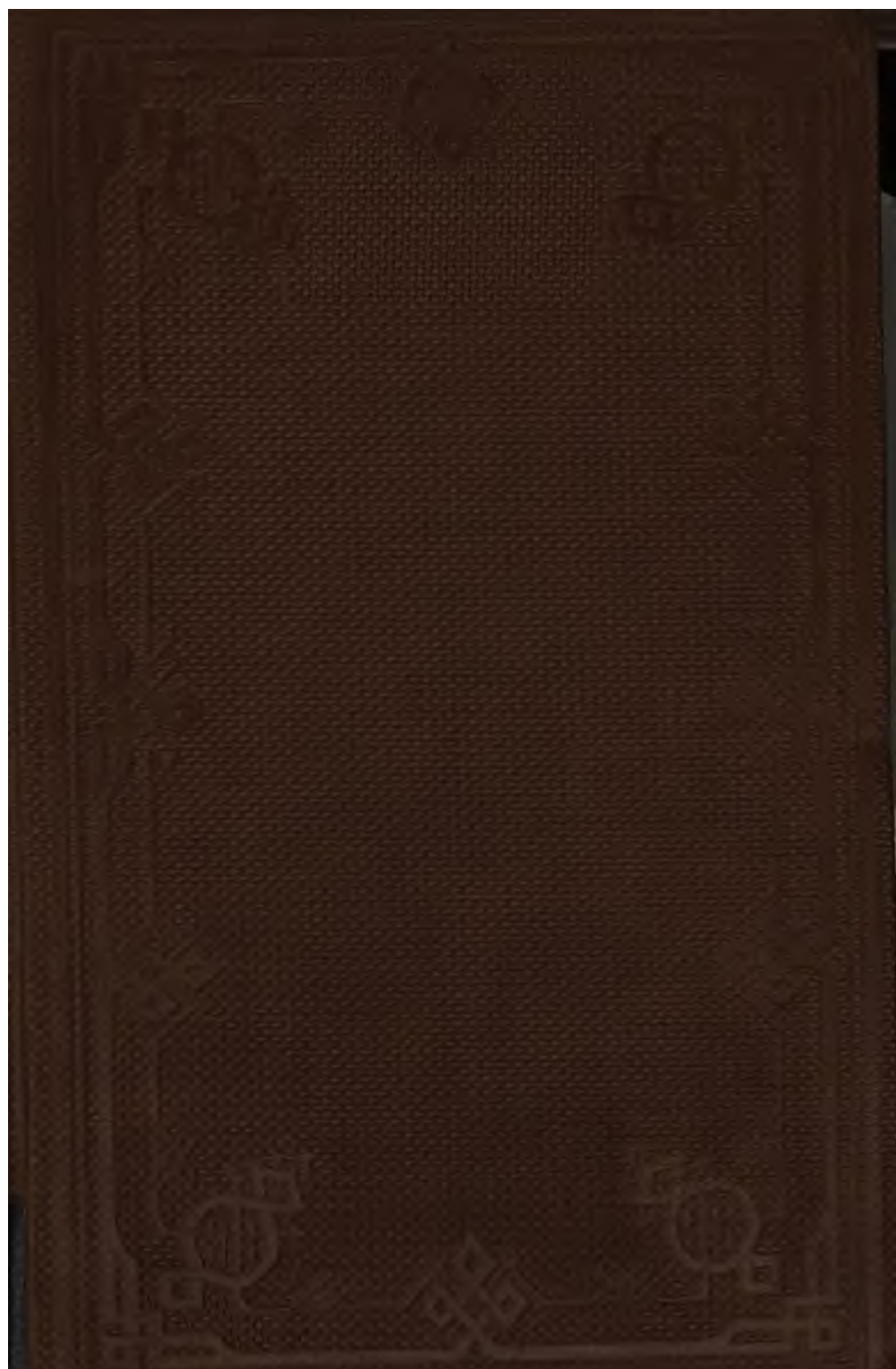
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A LIFE-STRUGGLE.

BY

MISS PARDOE,

AUTHOR OF

"LOUIS XIV. AND THE COURT OF FRANCE IN THE XVIIth CENTURY,"
"LIFE OF FRANCIS I. KING OF FRANCE," ETC.

IN TWO VOLUMES.

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A LIFE-STRUGGLE.

CHAPTER I.

A TRAVELLING REMINISCENCE.

LORD RAVENSWOOD was compelled to retire shortly after the conclusion of dinner, in order to attend his duties in the House of Lords; and Mrs. Heathcote, to whom he had sent to request that she would join the family party, and add her welcome to Marston on the first evening of his return, was unable to obey his summons. Indeed, since the marriage of her daughter, and her own intercourse with patrician society, she had begun to feel and to appreciate the prize of a high-sounding title at something even more than its actual value; and while she was averse to the idea of a

second union, by which the interests of Laura must ultimately suffer, she gradually indulged in dreams of personal aggrandisement, which, progressing by slender filaments like the web of a spider, soon became her sole anxiety.

Italy and Germany alike present the most facile opportunities for the gratification of so puerile an ambition as this. The purchase of a competent estate, and a patent (readily obtained for money), suffice to place the coveted honour within the grasp of the aspirant; and, consequently, the difficulty of selection was the only one with which Mrs. Heathcote had to contend.

For a day or two, but only for a day or two, she had visions of crushing her arrogant sister by securing and assuming one of the loftiest she could command; but her better judgment soon convinced her that by such a course she would incur, and deserve, the ridicule of the very circles which she sought to conciliate; and she finally determined to content herself with one of those cheaply-attained baronies which are ever at the command of the well-endowed in Austria. For this purpose she resolved to visit Vienna, well provided with letters of introduction to the

Court by her son-in-law and his aristocratic friends; and when Lord Ravenswood, on ascertaining her purpose, smiled half in sadness and half in pity, he felt inwardly gratified to learn that, painful as it undoubtedly would be to the embryo Baroness to be for the first time separated from her daughter, she had resolved to spend a couple of years in the Austrian dominions, in order thoroughly to accustom herself to her new honours before she assumed them in her own country.

Some legal business, connected with her speedy departure from England, had occupied Mrs. Heathcote throughout the day; and when the note of the Earl was placed in her hands she had already retired to rest, worn out with fatigue.

In the course of the evening, however, Carlyon, who was of course a privileged person, made his usual appearance in Belgrave Square; and as, after the first warm greeting had passed between her brother and himself, he became absorbed in Enna, Marston with considerable chagrin and emotion, found himself virtually *tête-à-tête* with Laura. The position was an onerous one, and he felt it to be such. His gravity deepened; his coldness

became more icy ; like his whilome mistress he feared himself, but, unlike her, he shrank from braving the danger.

“ My mother will greatly regret her inability to join our little party this evening, Mr. Marston ;” said the Countess, with one of her most winning smiles, resolved *coûte qui coûte*, to warm the marble into life. “ You were always one of her especial favourites.”

“ Your ladyship is very kind ;” was the reply, uttered in a tone which sufficiently evinced that his companion had failed to emulate Prometheus, and had drawn down no animating spark from heaven. “ I had not flattered myself that such was the case.”

“ Then you do injustice alike to her taste and to her judgment ;” persisted the reckless beauty, successfully concealing her annoyance ; “ she always speaks of you in the highest terms, and has regretted your long absence almost as much as Lord Ravenswood himself.”

“ The Earl is, I am happy to perceive, looking remarkably well ;” was the evasive rejoinder.

“ Enna !” exclaimed the Countess abruptly ; “ will you and Mr. Carlyon do me the favour to sing the duet to which your

brother was so partial before his departure? He will probably be pleased to hear it once more."

Miss Greville smiled her assent, and the two musicians approached the piano, which occupied the lower end of the apartment; but even as she traversed the floor, Enna could not refrain from thinking that, under the circumstances, the request was a very thoughtless one, as the duet in question had formerly constantly been sung by Ferdinand and Laura herself. She, however, abstained from all appearance of hesitation or reluctance; and although during the performance the heart of Marston throbbed as though it must every instant impede his respiration, not a muscle of his countenance, or a quivering of his lip, betrayed his inward suffering.

What Lady Ravenswood had possibly anticipated supervened. In order to dispel any unpleasant feeling which the old familiar air might have produced upon her brother, Miss Greville, ere the last note had fairly died away, again struck the keys, and executed with admirable taste and delicacy one of Brinley Richards's brilliant Noturnos. Another and another melody succeeded, and the echoes of

the vast saloon resounded with the harmonious blendings of Carlyon's flute and the full rich tones of the accompanying instrument.

All minor sounds passed almost into silence.

"I am afraid that the Eaux Bonnes must be but a dreary and half-savage place of sojourn, despite their European reputation;" said Lady Ravenswood, after a somewhat lengthy pause, during which she had been impatiently awaiting some effort at conversation from her impassive companion.

"May I inquire your ladyship's reason for forming such an opinion?"

"Nay, Mr. Marston;" was the half-playful, half-pettish reply: "I judge only from the effect which it has produced upon yourself."

"I must, however, entreat of you;" said Ferdinand; "not to allow your disappointment with regard to myself to induce you to peril your reputation for taste by decrying one of the most delightful spots on earth."

"I have often heard it so described, I admit," replied the Countess, who, irritated, and even more angry with herself than with him, in some degree lost her self-control; "but I had always imagined that the aspect

of the great and sublime in nature left behind it memories so delightful, that it became an absolute relief to the traveller to describe their peculiar beauties to those who had been less favoured than himself, and to dwell upon the adventures by which Nature, in her stern or soothing aspects, had become associated with human interests and feelings."

"You would imply that it is a duty in the pilgrim to become his own chronicler, and that I have failed in fulfilling mine?"

"Something of the sort, I confess. And am I not right? Here have you been several hours at home, and not an anecdote, not a description, have you vouchsafed to us. Have we not a right to complain? You have been the constant object of our thoughts during your absence, and not by either word or sign have you sought to convince us that you were equally mindful of those you had left behind."

A slight flush passed across the cheek of Marston, but his voice never faltered as he replied, looking for the first time steadily at his companion:—

"I have little to say of myself save that, sick in mind and body, I fear that I did not appreciate at their full value all the wonders

of the glorious region which I had selected as my temporary abode. Of course, as your ladyship will readily comprehend, I was well aware that at the Eaux Bonnes, as at all other fashionable places where the idle resort on the plea of weak health, I should find not only the actual invalids who had been sent thither by physicians hopeless of their cure, when they might have died more comfortably in their beds at home, but also the 'men about town' who, finding it expedient to part for a time from their tailors and bootmakers, eagerly speculated with their last resources at the gaming-tables; heiress-hunters, who had failed to bring down their quarry; *blazé* veterans, who found relief in change of scene and habits; adventurers on the look-out for fortune, careless in what guise it might present itself; swindlers with high-sounding names and elastic principles; men of worth in transitory contact with men of none; faded beauties; heartless coquettes; anxious mothers, trembling for the life of a beloved child; and devoted daughters watching over the last hours of a doomed parent, and fondly hoping against hope. For all this, as I have already said, I was prepared, and I was therefore ill-disposed

for so motley a society. I neither flirted, danced, nor gambled, and I was consequently so unprofitable and uninteresting a visitor to the establishment, that I soon found myself almost isolated in a crowd. It is not, therefore, of myself that I can speak ; while of the beauties of the neighbourhood of the Eaux Bonnes you will, I trust, be enabled to form a tolerable idea from the sketches which I have made for Enna."

" You *did* then remember Enna, at least, in your absence ; " said Lady Ravenswood ; " and thus I have elicited one confession."

" Can you doubt it ? " asked Ferdinand, resolutely overlooking the inference of the Countess.

" Thus, then, you have literally nothing to tell us—— " said Laura, after the silence of a moment.

" Pardon me ; I can tell you a story connected with the place, should you care to hear it."

" True or false ? "

" Painfully true."

" A story ! " exclaimed Miss Greville, springing up from the piano ; " are you going to tell us a story, Ferdinand ? Wait an instant

until Augustus and I draw our chairs close to you, for you know that I delight in listening to a story when it is well told."

"Were you acquainted with the actors in the tale?" asked Lady Ravenswood.

"Slightly with the whole of them. On my arrival I found Sir Gregory and Lady Danvers already established there, the Baronet having been advised to drink the waters for the benefit of his health. A more ill-assorted couple had never, in all probability, been united in marriage, the husband having already passed his fiftieth year, being partially bald, deeply wrinkled, short, and thin to attenuation, with a keen hard eye and considerable intelligence. His intellect was, however, only attractive to his own sex, as his subjects of discussion were uniformly profound and grave; and he was never seen to smile: on the other hand, he was a man of the nicest honour and the highest principle, and almost fabulously wealthy."

"And his wife?" asked the Countess impatiently.

"Lady Danvers had not completed her twentieth year. Tall, graceful, and elegant, she possessed one of those faces of rare beauty, which once seen is never obliterated from the

memory ; a voice of exquisite sweetness, and a dignified vivacity which defied even the chilling gravity of her husband. Highly educated, she was simple and unpretending in manner, and won all hearts by the cloudless sunshine of her look and smile."

"What could have induced so charming a creature to make so odious a marriage?" exclaimed Miss Greville.

"That is a secret which neither I nor any other sojourner at the Eaux Bonnes ever discovered;" said Marston; "though, as you may believe, the little world about her spared no exertions to ascertain the truth. It must suffice, therefore, that she *had* married him."

"It might be his wealth," observed Carlyon.

"Or his name," followed up Enna.

"No, no; neither money nor rank could ever induce *such* a woman so to sacrifice herself;" broke in the Countess; "and I can quite understand the astonishment and curiosity of her new friends; of all, indeed, save yourself, Mr. Marston: but to you I should imagine that ill-assorted marriages can scarcely be a subject of surprise."

"Your ladyship must do me the favour to remember;" said Ferdinand, with a coldness

which was almost stern ; “ that I am relating at your own request a story with which I am utterly unconnected. I am not endeavouring to parade my own feelings, but to describe the fatal event consequent upon those of others. Shall I proceed ? ”

Lady Ravenswood bent her head affirmatively, but made no other reply.

“ On a certain day there arrived at the Eaux Bonnes two travellers, the one a young man, suffering from a wound which he had received in a duel with an Austrian officer, and the other a woman evidently twice his age. Both husband and wife—for, by a strange fatality, such was the relation between them—were natives of Ireland ; and although Mr. Macdonough was still pale and languid from fever, it was easy to discover that he was a singularly handsome man. His situation naturally excited the sympathy of the whole party, particularly when it was ascertained that his cause of quarrel was one which did honour to his own patriotism and good feeling, leaving all the *onus* of the affair on his adversary. To the ladies especially he was an object of the greatest interest ; nor was it long ere it became matter of remark that his manner towards

Lady Danvers, although perfectly respectful and well-bred, was more soft and earnest than towards any other of his zealous attendants and companions.

“Mrs. Macdonough was taciturn, haughty, and somewhat supercilious, evidently vain of her young husband, and proud of the effect he had produced. When he did not require her services she was constantly engaged with a book, or an endless piece of embroidery, seeming to repel all society, and rarely volunteering a remark. Thus she was soon almost overlooked, and had it not been for her bodily presence, would have been forgotten.

“I will not weary you with unnecessary details. At the close of a couple of months the health of Macdonough was perfectly re-established, and a finer young fellow I most assuredly never met with. But while time had restored his system, it had undermined the reputation of Lady Danvers. Cautious whispers grew into confident reports ——”

“False ones, I have no doubt;” said the Countess.

“So I also thought and hoped;” pursued Marston; “but such was, unhappily, not the case. One day, as a portion of our party were

preparing for an excursion in the neighbourhood, and just as I had flung my sketch-book and folding-stool into one of the carriages, the report of two pistol-shots was heard from the direction of a little wood about a quarter of a mile from the establishment, and an universal feeling of alarm impelled all the gentlemen present towards the spot whence it had proceeded."

"And what did you discover?" gasped out Lady Ravenswood, while Miss Greville buried her face in her hands, and shuddered with apprehension.

"Three dead bodies;" said Ferdinand solemnly. "Sir Gregory Danvers had killed his wife and Mr. Macdonough with the same ball, and had then blown out his own brains."

"Unfortunate woman!" murmured the Countess, pressing her hands together so tightly as to force back the blood from her slender fingers.

"And her husband?—her wronged and injured husband?—have you no pity for him?" asked Marston with a quivering lip. "She had seen fit to marry him. He had trusted his honour to her, and she had violated his trust; he had placed his happiness in her

hands, and she had blasted it ; he had bestowed on her, as her best dowry, his good name, and she had made it a by-word and a scorn."

Lady Ravenswood shrank back upon her cushions, and did not raise her eyes.

"And what became of the unhappy Mrs. Macdonough?" asked Enna through her tears.

"I know not ; for I only remained at the Eaux Bonnes to follow the poor Baronet to the carriage which was to convey him to his family-vault in England, and to see the earth piled upon the graves of the woman who had dishonoured him and the man by whom she had been dishonoured, when I turned my back upon all the beauties of the Eaux Bonnes, as I trust for ever, since nothing can obliterate the remembrance of that fearful week."

"The young Irishman was a wretch who deserved his fate ;" said Lady Ravenswood, rallying back her energy by what was evidently a violent effort. "Yes, he at least, richly deserved his fate, for he could not justify himself by asserting that he had given his hand against his will to a woman old enough to have

been his mother. *Men* cannot be so coerced ; they can always resist, and resist successfully the tyranny of those about them ; while *women* ——,”

At that instant a carriage was heard to stop at the door, a loud peal of the bell followed, and the remainder of the sentence died upon her tongue. The Earl had returned from St. Stephen's.

CHAPTER II.

A BRIDAL PARTY.

THE position of Marston was one which tried alike all the firmness of his principles and all the faculties of his soul. That Laura still loved him, despite his apparent treachery and heartlessness, he could not doubt; while, like Laura herself, he was divided between a sort of delirious joy at the constant presence of the only being whom he had ever really loved, and the terrors of a future which promised nothing but despair. As a married woman only, Lady Ravenswood would have been sacred in his eyes ; but as the wife of his friend and benefactor she was invested with a solemnity of respect which caused him to shudder at his own sinfulness whenever he found himself involuntarily dwelling upon her image. In the very innocence and impatience of a blighted heart she was perpetually betray-

ing her secret, and it required all his strength of mind and uprightness of purpose to control the impulse which would have led him to confess that his suffering and his struggle were as great as her own, and to weep with her after that confession over their mutual misery. Like two saplings planted a few paces apart, whose leaves must have mingled could the same breeze have bent their flexile stems the one towards the other, they were together, and yet effectually separated; the deep gulf of duty and honour yawned between them, and only some unnatural convulsion of nature could overcome the obstacle.

That Miss Greville would have readily detected, and earnestly striven to counteract the pernicious effects of such constant companionship between her idolized brother and her most cherished friend, cannot be doubted for a moment, had not her own approaching marriage occupied her thoughts and blunted her perceptions; but as Marston, in compliance with the wishes of the Earl, had with some difficulty been persuaded to make the necessary preparations for an early transit to the Castle, in order that the ceremony should take place under his own roof, she found ample

occupation in preparing for the important event, and much that was taking place about her passed consequently unnoticed.

The feverish excitement of the young Countess, as she overwhelmed her husband's ward with costly gifts, and hurried with her from one scene of extravagance and outlay to another, appeared to Enna nothing more than an over-anxiety for her own gratification: she was not aware that it deadened for awhile the host of struggling passions which were sapping the very foundations of Laura's being; while Laura herself, after the breathless exertions of the day, was so beautiful in the soft languor induced by overfatigue as the little family-party assembled in the evening, that never had Marston or the Earl remembered her so lovely.

At length the season was over; the Court had removed to Osborne; and the most inveterate town-lovers were looking blank at the prospect of being left alone in the vast metropolis, like Selkirk on his desert island. Maps of Europe were studied; continental tours were arranged; hunting-boxes secured; invitations to Halls, and Parks, and Chases canvassed by fashionables with slender means and lofty pre-

tensions ; the clubs were winnowed of their *habitués* ; the drives deserted ; and London was about to be left in all the dreary weariness of plebeian guardianship ; scaffoldings were beginning to invade the stately exteriors of lordly mansions and glittering “ emporiums ; ” all the terrors of macadamisation were pouring themselves out by cart-loads in aristocratic squares and crescents ; newspapers decorated the plate-glass windows which had so recently been draped with satin and damask ; and carriages ceased to impede each other’s progress in the public streets.

Marston had not been idle. Like the French convicts who toil in the fortresses with a cannon-ball attached to their legs, which they are compelled to drag with them as the companion of their labour, but who, nevertheless, perform their allotted tasks, so did the unhappy young man resolutely apply himself to the duties which had devolved upon him, even while he was crushed beneath the weight of his own unuttered anguish of spirit.

Thus the settlements were prepared, the minor arrangements concluded, and, finally, the Ravenswood family found themselves fairly beyond the precincts of town.

A few of the relations on both sides had been invited by Lord Ravenswood to be present at the marriage of his ward, and these were to follow within a month. Mrs. Heathcote, who was on the eve of starting for Vienna, took leave of the little party on their departure from town ; but Sir Marmaduke and Lady Willoughby, with a mature niece of the Baronet's then on a visit with him, and who had a passion for marriages and noblemen's castles ; an early friend of Enna's, who was to officiate as her principal bridesmaid ; the younger brother of Mr. Carlyon, who, attached to a foreign legation, chanced to be in England on leave ; and an old bachelor-cousin of the Earl's, had all readily responded to his invitation.

Arthur Willoughby, for whom his father had, somewhat reluctantly, after his *esclandre*, purchased a commission in the Life Guards, was to follow, when his valuable services could be dispensed with in town ; and these, together with the members of such of the county families as Lord Ravenswood was in the habit of receiving at the Castle, were to comprise the invited guests.

Lady Willoughby was enchanted ; and found sufficient occupation during the month

which she had still to remain in town in selecting her most stately plumes, her most costly jewels, and her richest velvets and brocades, in order properly to impress the country neighbours of her noble host. She was aunt to a Countess, and mother to a Lifeguardsman ; her obnoxious sister, with her atmosphere of commerce and her insolence of wealth, was absent—although she was ignorant of her errand, a knowledge of which would in a great degree have subdued her own triumph—and thus not a cloud traversed the horizon of her exultation.

Nor was Sir Marmaduke altogether unmoved by the prospect before him, although he had sundry misgivings that Lord Ravenswood, peer of the realm as he was, had neither a table nor cellar to compete with his own : and he sighed more than once as he remembered a particular bin of Madeira, which had made so many voyages that it is quite certain it would have been unanimously voted into the Travellers' Club, had the members of that comfortable establishment been invited to receive it. Once or twice, too, he contemplated the expediency of offering the services of his French cook to his lordship ; but, from some

cause or other, he hesitated to do so, until the departure of the Earl rendered the scheme abortive. He therefore philosophically determined to resign himself to the worst; and having, agreeably to the suggestions of his wife, ordered a new wig, he let matters take their course.

Nothing could be more enchanting than the aspect of the country around Ravenswood Castle on the arrival of the bridal party. The woods wore their richest green; the noble sheet of water which separated the home-park from the far-reaching hills and glades beyond, sparkled and shimmered in the summer sunshine; the deer, lazily grouped together, stood half-buried in fern, within the shadows of the tall trees; while the noble terrace that spanned the stately edifice was bright with vases of many-coloured flowers.

An universal exclamation of delight burst from the lips of all who now beheld the princely residence of the Earl for the first time, as the several carriages drew up and deposited their freight at the entrance of a marble-paved hall of vast dimensions, and richly adorned with statuary; the quiet, unobtrusive, and domestic habits of Lord Ra-

venswood while in town not having prepared them for the magnificence of his family estate ; and as Lady Willoughby looked around her, she became more than ever impressed by the potency of wealth, while a feeling of personal pride stole over her as she remembered that it was to *her* niece that its noble owner was indebted for the means of rescuing so fine an estate from actual mortgage, and in all probability from ultimate sale. Bitterly also did she remember, that had Arthur succeeded in winning the hand of the merchant's daughter, which she had so reluctantly, and even disdainfully, authorised him to ask as the remedy for his own improvidence, he might at that moment have been the master, if not actually of Ravenswood Castle, at least of some equally imposing home. To her there was consequently a canker at the core of her enjoyment ; and while her vanity was gratified to find herself a guest beneath such a roof, her heart rebelled against it.

Miss Dorothea Cleveland, the Baronet's niece, was the eldest of five sisters, the whole of whom had been left to the fraternal affection of an only brother, who had, as a matter of course, inherited the family estates ; and who,

on the death of his widowed mother, hastened to supply her place in the establishment with a pretty, half-educated, and wild-eyed girl, several years younger than the junior Miss Cleveland; who, until the advent of the very unwelcome bride, had still cherished a fond dream that her chance in the matrimonial market was not entirely hopeless. No sooner, however, did the laughing, restless, mocking, bounding little beauty, with her clouds of chestnut hair, rich red lips, sparkling teeth, and snowy complexion, enter the Hall on the arm of her exulting young husband, than, one and all, the Misses Cleveland intuitively felt that the "shady places" of the house must thenceforward be theirs, while the sunshine would be absorbed by their new relative.

They had not reached the drawing-room before a most lugubrious and self-pitying glance was exchanged between them; and although they had never hitherto been very remarkable for unanimity, a sudden sympathy grew up between them at that moment which augured ill for the childlike and thoughtless Mrs. Cleveland.

Every look and every action of the invader of their peace and dignity was successively

canvassed and condemned. She did not know one pattern of tapestry from another, eschewed crochet, and abominated piquet. What was to be done with her? As a necessary consequence, each peculiar Miss Cleveland had her own theory of improvement and reformation to suggest; but, unhappily, they were all coldly received by their brother. He loved to see Eva flitting from room to room like a fairy, to hear her carolling like a bird, to watch for her smiles, and to echo her words of endearment; while, on her side, provided that Adolphus were ever ready to respond to her joyous merriment—and when did he ever fail her?—she cared little, as she declared to him, for the cold looks and disparaging comments of five prim, and starch, and disappointed old maids.

Bad elements these to amalgamate into a happy home!

Adolphus laughed, as in duty bound, when, throwing herself upon his bosom, she thus frankly insisted upon her independence of all save himself; but as a stifled sob of mortification and disappointment occasionally accompanied the declaration; and as, moreover, he had an unpleasant recollection that, unless

some eligible suitor or suitors should present themselves for his sisters—and, looking at his own bright and blooming bride, he could not but confess to himself that the contingency was a very remote one—he had only two disagreeable alternatives left to him; either to gradually reconcile his adored Eva to their weary companionship, or seriously to injure his income by establishing them in some “cottage of gentility,” with their pony-phaeton and green-house; nor could he refrain from wishing that the family estates had not been quite so heavily encumbered. Regrets of this description were, however, useless. There were the five Miss Clevelands, incessantly glancing at their light-hearted sister-in-law, as the attendants of Jephtha’s daughter may be supposed to have done at their beloved companion, when they wandered with her to bewail her coming martyrdom: they could see nothing in her young gladness but the sure precursor of coming evil. What could be hoped, what could be anticipated, from a heedless child of seventeen, but sorrow and mortification to their ancient name? A doll, that Adolphus had been mad enough to invest with the duties and responsibilities of a woman.

What could he want with a wife? Was he not the youngest of the family? and were *they* not there to superintend the comforts and amenities of his household?

There was but one resource left for the Miss Clevelands, and that was to act strictly in unison, and to uphold their own recognised authority in their ancestral home. Having, one and all, therefore emphatically expressed to their by-no-means-repentant brother their deep sense of the indignity to which he had subjected them, they resolved to impress him with a full appreciation of their displeasure, by resolutely refusing to accept of any separate establishment, however eligible; and by remaining under the family roof in order to repress, by the decorum of their presence, the overweening high spirits and reckless happiness of the newly-made wife.

Put them forth contrary to their own wish, Adolphus Cleveland decently could not, and the worthy spinsters knew it; and thus he soon found that his wild rose had five sharp thorns in her side which were likely, ere long, to destroy her sweetness. But what could be done?

At this precise period, Sir Marmaduke

Willoughby wrote to invite one of his nieces to town. He cared not which among them might respond to the invitation; and the senior Miss Cleveland, (having just happily completed a hearth-rug and a set of chair-cushions, each adorned with a fat Blenheim spaniel asleep upon a hassock, and half-strangled by a blue ribbon about its neck,) being sadly in want of some fresh excitement, determined to avail herself of so promising an opportunity of looking once more upon the London world, little anticipating the further relaxation of mind and spirits which awaited her in the visit to Ravenswood Castle.

Tall, thin, and angular, rigidly upright, and constitutionally solemn, Miss Cleveland was a perfect Killjoy in her own home, though she could occasionally unbend in society. Her pale and prominent blue eyes, her very warm-coloured hair, which she persisted in calling auburn, and wore twisted above her brow like an Oriental turban; her square-built figure, strongly-articulated joints, and heavy hands and feet, had robbed her of all pretension to good looks even in her youth: nor had they increased the charm of her maturity. Fortunately, however, both for her

temper and her complexion—which is generally the one redeeming feature of red-haired persons—she had learnt for the last few years to regard herself as an inevitable old maid, and had accordingly resigned herself to her fate—a circumstance which tended to render her the least disagreeable of the five sisters. Still, as is by no means uncommon with persons of her sex who have little mind, and, consequently, little real employment, she had, as we have already stated, a passion for weddings and great people; and was, consequently, gravely important when she discovered, after having been for some weeks in town, that she was actually about to assist at a marriage under the roof of an Earl.

Jessie Armitage, the chosen friend and confidant of Enna, was a sweet young creature, gentle, and timid as a fawn; with deep, dark eyes, half-veiled by their long silken lashes; the form of a sylph; and the foot of a fairy. No one had ever seen a frown upon the brow of Jessie Armitage, the only child of a fond old father, of whose widowhood she had been the solace and the charm. Richer in heart even than in fortune, happy in the present, and as yet too guileless and unselfish

to speculate upon the future, she lived on from hour to hour like a bird or a blossom, unconscious or regardless that darker days might come. Youth is always beautiful in its trustfulness, and hers was an existence of trust in all around her. There was no resisting her low, sweet voice, her pleading, eloquent look, her graceful, winning manner; and Miss Greville had long learnt to love her as a sister. Warmly did she return that love; and it was not without a vague hope that the brother of her own Augustus might appreciate the rare merit of her beloved young friend, that Enna urged her to join the bridal party.

Of Innes Carlyon little need be said. He was young, handsome, hopeful, and enthusiastic; with that good-breeding and polish which a residence in foreign courts seldom fails to impart. Highly connected, his path had been smoothed before him, and promised to lead him far and fast in a career of prosperity.

The Hon. Mr. Saville Thornton, the Earl's cousin, was the very antipodes of the gay, buoyant, and mirth-loving Innes Carlyon. Verging on his sixtieth year, a martyr to the gout, a sulky, grumbling, but inveterate chess-

player, never admitting that he was beaten, and always insolent in his triumph; as resolute a *bon-vivant* as Sir Marmaduke Willoughby himself, as vain and malicious as his wife, and as solemn and self-centered as Miss Dorothea Cleveland, he was altogether rather a compound of disagreeables; nor was it often that Lord Ravenswood, himself one of the most amenable and considerate of men, ventured to volunteer anything approaching to domestication with his uncongenial relative.

Such was the party assembled at the Castle in anticipation of the approaching event; and, as will be seen, it was just numerous enough to render each guest so far independent of the rest as to afford to him or her that liberty of action compatible with comfort. Enna and Carlyon would loiter for hours in the music-room, or wander away unquestioned through the leafy coverts or among the grassy glades of the park. Lady Ravenswood, her delicate fingers weaving mimic flowers at her embroidery-frame, could listen to the admirable reading of Ferdinand Marston, only interrupted by the low grumbling of Mr. Thornton at the chess-table which occupied the deep bay of a window, or the meek apology

of his antagonist for her presumption in check-mating, or otherwise marring the game of so superior and admirable a player. Innes Carlyon had undertaken to teach Miss Armitage billiards, and a very apt and graceful pupil she proved to be ; while the Earl himself found ample occupation in giving audience to his land-steward and tenants, and in visiting his farms.

Then there were riding, driving, and boating-parties ; visits to receive and return ; a few arrangements still to be made for the approaching ceremony ; the letter-bag to be emptied and filled ; and all the other minor occupations which constitute the "busy idleness" of a great country-house, to complete the business of the day.

Sir Marmaduke Willoughby had been agreeably surprised by the excellence of his host's table and cellar, and took a daily amble on a remarkably sure-footed and docile shooting-pony, which was placed at his disposition ; while his wife, who regarded herself as the natural *chaperone* of her niece, did the honours of the house to the country visitors with a dignified condescension by which they were highly impressed, and which formed a very

stately contrast to the unstudied and cordial demeanour of Lady Ravenswood herself.

And so a week went by ; and the Lord Bishop of ——, an old and esteemed friend and college comrade of the Earl's, arrived at the Castle to perform the marriage ceremony.

CHAPTER III.

A BRIDAL BREAKFAST.

ENNA looked very lovely as she entered the Castle chapel upon the arm of her brother; the prismatic tints from the richly-painted windows playing over her snowy dress and veil, and the subdued light of happiness beaming from her soft eyes. Immediately behind her followed Miss Armitage, accompanied by three of the fairest and highest-born of the county beauties; while the remainder of the guests, and the tenants and servants of Lord Ravenswood, nearly filled the ancient edifice beneath whose finely carved and fretted roof they stood. Many years had elapsed since so festive an assemblage had been gathered within its walls; and there was a solemnity in the dim light, the deep peal of the organ, and the hushed silence of the congregation, that struck to every heart.

Ere long all was over. Lord Ravenswood

had bestowed the hand of his ward upon the proudly-happy Carlyon; the last sacred words were said; and as the newly-married pair led the way back through the pictured galleries which connected the chapel with the inhabited portion of the castle, the Countess felt her hand drawn through the arm of Marston.

"You must console me to-day;" he whispered, in a voice which was unsteady from emotion. "Now that I have given my sister to another, I feel too late that in my own selfish sorrows I have not been to her all that she had a right to expect. I——"

"Nay, nay;" expostulated the Countess in the same suppressed tone; "you have, on the contrary, been only too generous; for you have forgotten your own interests in your anxiety for hers."

"You mistake my meaning. Nothing is more easy than to be liberal of money to those we love; it is in the bestowal of affection that I have appeared to be wanting; and yet ——"

"Is Enna the only one who has had cause to feel pained by your coldness since your return to England?" asked Lady Ravenswood reproachfully.

"I fear not;" was the reply; "but,

believe me, that it has been in manner only that I have failed."

He felt the hand tremble that rested upon his arm.

"To your noble husband," he hastily continued; "I owe a life-long gratitude, which nothing can efface from my heart; Carlyon has long been to me a cherished friend; while, as to yourself, you have so patiently and kindly borne with my waywardness that I know not how to thank you."

Lady Ravenswood coldly averted her head.

"Even now, as you perceive;" he pursued, affecting not to remark the gesture. "I turn to you to reconcile me to myself."

"Would not Miss Armitage possibly prove a better and more efficient consoler?" was the bitter inquiry of his companion.

"Dear little Jessie would do her best, I know, in any good work;" said Marston; "but she is not precisely the person to comprehend my scruples. It is only those who have themselves known sorrow and anxiety who can thoroughly sympathise with the sorrowing and the anxious."

"True;" replied the Countess: "and I have known both."

"At least," said Ferdinand; "you have already acquired some worldly experience; but it has been, I fervently trust, cheaply purchased; whereas ——"

"We will not further discuss this point, Mr. Marston;" broke in Lady Ravenswood quickly; "only tell me how I can contribute to your comfort."

"By assuring Enna that my strong affection for her has undergone no change, however circumstances may have led her to form such a suspicion. Did she know all she would acquit me, and render the kindly offices of an advocate unnecessary."

"Let me, then, tell her all."

"*You!—You tell her all!*" exclaimed the agitated young man, thrown for a moment off his guard. "How could I suffer your lips to utter that which I dare not tell her myself?"

"In that case;" smiled Lady Ravenswood, as a brilliant bloom rose to her cheek, which betrayed that she had read his meaning; "my mission must fail, as I shall be an ambassadress without credentials."

"Will no one, then, accept my motives on trust, and give me credit for one good

quality which I may not appear to possess?" asked Ferdinand.

"That is a jesuitical question I am by no means bound to answer; and, fortunately, there is no longer either time or opportunity for doing so, as we are on the threshold of the drawing-room, and you must hasten to be the first to greet your sister in her new character."

The extreme beauty and antiquity of the chapel having induced the Bishop to examine it in detail, Lord Ravenswood had lingered with him for some time after the departure thence of the bridal party, and the excitement of congratulations and compliments had consequently subsided ere they again appeared; when the Earl tenderly folded the blushing and fluttered Enna to his bosom, while the venerable prelate shook hands with Marston and Carlyon, ere he offered his arm to the young hostess to conduct her to the breakfast-hall.

Only one face around the sumptuous board of the Earl wore a melancholy expression, and that one was the face of Miss Dorothea Cleveland, who assured Mr. Thornton that she had never, from her girlhood,

been able to witness a marriage without shedding tears. It was so fearful a risk for a woman, whose home and husband should comprise her world. The chosen of her heart might cease to love her; or, still more harrowing thought! prove unworthy of the trust which she had blindly, but fondly, placed in his integrity and honour: and then, what must be her fate? A life of misery—an old age of tears! It was really frightful to contemplate such a contingency!

“And the man, ma’am; the man!” growled out the old bachelor, with his mouth full of truffled turkey; “do you consider that *he* runs no risk?”

“Little or none;” blandly responded the bright-haired spinster, daintily playing with a *rissole* of chicken. “Your lordly sex are free from the weaknesses of ours; they are more discriminating, more judicious, less influenced by mere passing fancies and prejudices. *We* suffer our hearts to run away with us, while *you* never act without making an appeal to your reason. I do not, of course, speak of mere boys, who fancy themselves in love with every girlish face they chance to look upon, and disregard the mental qualities of a woman

while they idolise her physical attractions; but of individuals of matured judgment and adequate experience, who are aware that a wife should be something more than a plaything, and make their selection accordingly."

"Of course, of course!" said the Honourable Saville, setting down his empty champagne glass, and motioning to the butler to refill it. "Your remark is a very sensible one. Women do generally make sad fools of themselves in their anxiety to secure husbands, and you see what has been the natural result: when they are once on the shady side of thirty they are branded as old maids, because we know that if they remain unmarried it has been no fault of their own; while, as regards men, who, everybody knows, could marry when and who they pleased, no one makes a remark, save that they have followed the bent of their own inclinations, and preferred a single life, and the certainty that they have not put the wrong woman in the wrong place."

"Admirably argued!" smiled Dorothea, without suffering her mortification to betray itself; "and this it is which, as I have already stated, invariably makes a marriage festival a

melancholy rejoicing in my eyes. There are so many blanks in every lottery to one prize."

"Aye, a vast number indeed!" was the acquiescent reply. "Pretty faces may be pleasant objects enough in a sick-room, but their owners seldom make careful nurses; and prudent men, ma'am, marry for better and not for worse, and are right to guard against the alternative. Young folks do not pause to reflect on the future; and yet the future is always, or ought always, to be taken into consideration, Miss Cleveland. There are such things as gout, rheumatism, and dyspepsia in the world—— Let me recommend this *salmi de perdreaux*, it is really very respectable; Ravenswood's *chef* is no bungler."

The lady gratefully accepted the delicate attention. It was really a flattering demonstration from a Saville Thornton, and she was not discouraged yet.

"Mrs. Gore Cunningham," murmured Lady Willoughby across a stout, florid, apoplectic-looking county member, who separated her from her new acquaintance; "your daughter is a perfect vision of beauty to-day; and I venture to prophesy that she will not

often again officiate at a similar ceremony merely as a bridesmaid. We must positively have her in town, where she will be admired as you have a right to feel that she should be. I trust that we shall see her next season, creating quite a sensation."

"Your ladyship is most kind;" said the flattered mother, who, being by no means deficient in olive-branches, felt no disinclination to transplant her eldest scion to another soil. "Bella is certainly rather a pretty girl, but you know that sixteen always carries its own attractions."

"Yes, yes! *beauté du diable*, as a French author has wittily called youth. And were that all I should not have hazarded a remark; but Miss Gore Cunningham has more than youth on her side—an admission which, having no daughter of my own, I have no reservation in making."

Lady Willoughby was an able tactician, and this slight exertion of civility secured to her, as she had anticipated, an invitation to the Moat House when her visit to Lord Ravenswood should have concluded.

"Do you know, Miss Armitage;" murmured Innes Carlyon to his fair neighbour; "that had I been an artist, I should have

gone wild in the chapel to-day, and should scarcely be in my sober senses at this moment. My new sister-in-law must have been very sure of her hold on Augustus when she selected four such friends to attend her to the altar."

"What!" exclaimed Jessie, turning the full light of her wierd eyes upon him in astonishment; "do you imagine that Augustus Carlyon—that your brother—could ever think or dream of any thing or any being more lovely than my sweet and matchless Enna? If he could he is not worthy of her."

"Nay, Miss Armitage; I was thinking only of myself."

"Well," said Jessie simply; "you had a right to do that, of course; but I, who have known her and loved her for years, am sincerely happy to assure you that he is the most fortunate man in existence."

"I trust not;" replied Innes, striving to look once more into her sparkling eyes.

"You trust not;" she exclaimed with astonishment. "What can you possibly mean, Mr. Carlyon?"

"That I hope he is only one of the most fortunate."

"You are right;" smiled Jessie; "and I

have, as usual, said a very foolish thing. Of course there are many other girls in the world as good and as pretty as my dear Enna; and yet—you may laugh at me as you like—but I scarcely believe it.”

“I doubt if there be many;” said her companion; “but I have firm faith that there are some.”

“Find them!” whispered the warm-hearted girl in affected defiance.

“Do not urge me on my fate;” pleaded her companion playfully. “I am young and helpless, an enforced sojourner in a foreign land: one of those odious waifs and strays of primogeniture, a younger brother. I am not Augustus, I am only Innes; he will one day feast on the fatted calf, while I shall only have the jawbone for my portion.”

“And no bad portion for a diplomatist;” said Jessie saucily.

“Miss Armitage, you are censorious;” replied the young man, in mock indignation; “but, do you know, it has just struck me that you would make an inimitable ambassadress. You never look your interlocutor fairly in the face, and no one has any chance or hope of ascertaining your true meaning.”

“ Mr. Carlyon ! ”

“ What a pretty look of surprise and horror ! but I maintain my assertion. However, a man has no chance of justice to-day, when he is fairly floored by gauze, and flowers, and smiles, and all the witchery of feminine artillery. I capitulate, and throw myself on your mercy.”

“ You are really very provoking, Mr. Innes Carlyon.”

“ I am glad to hear, Miss Armitage, particularly from your own lips, that we at least meet upon equal terms. Shall I offer you a peach ? ”

“ If it were not for your brother’s sake, I declare —— ”

“ What ? Pray favour me with your declaration. What anathema are you about to hurl against me ? ”

Jessie suddenly started, her soft cheek crimsoned, the long lashes drooped and fell over her brilliant eyes, and she sat silent and subdued as a chidden child. There had been a suppressed accent of triumph in the voice, and an involuntary expression of exultation in the manner of her companion, which had at once sufficed to check the buoyancy of her spirits ; she felt, although she knew not where-

fore, that she had been indiscreet enough to suffer him to assume an attitude towards her which was unwarranted by their recent acquaintance; and large tears, which she found it difficult to repress, rose obtrusively at the thought.

The young man detected the fact in a moment, and as instantly strove to repair his error. Anxious to divert her thoughts from his inadvertence, he glanced hastily around him for a new subject of discourse, and as he did so his eye fell upon a pyramid of lilies which occupied a pedestal of white marble in one of the recesses.

“How very beautiful is the vase opposite to us, Miss Armitage!” he said, directing her attention to the object which had attracted his own. “I love lilies, and I have often thought that the graceful idea of burning lights in alabaster lamps must have been derived from *them*, with their pure, white, scented leaves, amid which the golden petals look like a living flame. How typical they are too of a young, sinless heart, full of rich odour, and hoarding its holiest feelings like incense.”

“Why, you are quite a poet, Mr. Carlyon.”

“Under certain inspirations I am, but it

is by no means my 'habit as I live.' On the contrary, you will, when you come to know me better, find me a very matter-of-fact and prosaic person indeed."

"That is fortunate, for I was really beginning to feel quite frightened of you."

"But are so, I trust, no longer?"

"Not upon that point, certainly, since you so resolutely disclaim the distinction. But, hark! there is the travelling-carriage driving to the door, and we shall soon lose Enna and your brother."

A few moments afterwards the bride glided like a snow-flake from the hall, followed by her attendant maidens. The hour of separation was come; and at length, amid tears, caresses, recommendations, and promises, Carlyon bore away his newly-made wife to Marston Hall, where they were, after the lapse of a few weeks, to be joined by her brother. The next departure was that of the Bishop, all the other guests being engaged to remain for the ball which was to take place in the evening.

The venerable prelate had no sooner driven off than the Countess, leaving to Lady Wilmoughby the coveted office of hostess, withdrew to her own apartment, the door of which she

locked behind her. To her the day had been one of intense trial; only for a few brief moments had she been brought into contact with Marston, but these few had sufficed to excite a host of conflicting emotions; while she was at the same time impressed with a perfect conviction, that it was not alone a sense of his short-comings towards his sister that had caused the gloom and depression by which he was evidently oppressed.

“No;” she murmured to herself; “he, like me, remembered as we took our places in the bridal train, that it was not thus we once thought to approach the altar together: he, false and perjured; and I, even if still true in heart, equally treacherous in word and act. Mockery!” she continued, as, catching a passing glance of her own person in a mirror, she tore away the chaplet of pearls which had confined her luxuriant hair; “why should I have been so weak as to deck myself like a bride, when I am widowed both of hope and happiness? And yet, in one thing at least, I am a gainer by this marriage: the regretful, and almost upbraiding eyes of Enna are no longer upon me; she saw and felt that I love him still, and her pure nature revolted from what

she considered as a sin. And is it not a sin ? Because I have not outraged the conventionalities of the world, am I not guilty in my own eyes ? Alas, yes ! for I love him still. And my husband ! so good, so noble, what is he to me ? A tender friend, a fond father. I would not repay him with ingratitude, but love him as a wife should love the man to whom she has sworn at the altar to devote her whole being, I cannot ! I am still only a mere girl, and already my life is blighted. How shall I be enabled to struggle on through long, long years of misery and disappointment ? Can I, by a strong effort of the will, liberate myself from the thrall of this unhappy passion ?” And her head sank lower upon her bosom, and she clasped her hands convulsively as she murmured, “Do I even wish to do so ? That Ferdinand once loved me deeply and tenderly I know ; it is idle to attempt to cheat myself into a contrary belief : that some mystery is attached to our separation I am more convinced day by day, for he loves me still. Yes ! I feel it, I know it ; cold as he may strive to appear, there are moments in which he is self-betrayed. Only to-day ; how could I mistake him to-day ? We both struggle, we both

suffer—that, at least, is a thought of joy ; we have still one feeling in common. But how can all this end ? How *should* it end ? I must perform the duties to which I have vowed myself, even until my heart breaks in the effort. He will soon leave us for a time, and meanwhile I will prove to him that I am not unworthy of the love that he has found it as impossible as myself to cast from him. I will compel him to respect and to regret me ; and one day perhaps, when our changed feelings may permit us to converse upon the past, he will reveal to me the secret cause of our present misery.”

Poor Laura ! How brave, how self-relying she felt at that moment ! and yet, had she analysed her own heart, she would have discovered that the very battle which she thus resolved to fight against herself, was not to be fought because it was one of duty and of principle, but simply because it was to convince Marston of the value of the affection that he had voluntarily relinquished.

Woe unto him who builds his house upon a bank of sand !

CHAPTER IV.

THE BRIDAL BALL.

THE ball was gay and brilliant ; and, strange to say, the gayest and the brightest individual in that scene of splendour and festivity was the young Countess herself ; for, buoyant and excited by the sense of what she considered her self-conquest, she resolutely threw from her every painful and perplexing thought, and lived only in the passing hour.

Far different, however, was the deportment of Marston. The flashing eye and graceful laughter of Laura at once bewildered and depressed him. What could be the meaning of such a change ? Had he, indeed, in that brief dialogue on leaving the chapel, betrayed the fearful secret of his unconquered passion ? And could it be that a knowledge of his continued and hopeless struggle against feelings which had now become a crime, had so flattered

her vanity as to render her blind to the enormity of his fault ?

“ No, no ;” he murmured, a moment afterwards ; “ she cannot be so heartless ; she, whose gentleness and purity of mind enthralled me even more than her beauty : and yet, if it be otherwise, what have I not to fear alike for her and for myself ? My own misery I could have borne ; but to know that she also suffers will almost madden me.”

Wild and sad thoughts these with which to stem the torrent of gaiety that was chafing and foaming about him, and threatening every instant to drive him to despair. The flashing of gems, the glare of light, the buoyant movements, the enlivening music, which while it gladdened others only added to his own prostration of spirit, and, worse than all, the radiant form of her whom he so devotedly loved, glancing at frequent intervals in all the pride of dress and conscious beauty before his eyes, appeared a mockery so bitter that his brain whirled, and his pulses beat with fever. Like an unquiet spirit he wandered from room to room, and finally made his way to the conservatory, where he threw himself upon a seat behind a group of flowering shrubs.

Here he could at least enjoy for a few brief moments comparative tranquillity: the sounds of the music, and the rapid footfalls of the dancers, were subdued by distance; the mellow light of the Chinese lamps which were suspended among the exotic plants, and which formed the only illumination of the flowery wilderness, soothed and calmed him; and ere long he began to reflect more healthily upon his position.

“Better, far better, were it for me;” he mused; “that Laura should indeed exult in her influence over my heart, than that she should still love me. And is not the very power which she is now exercising over herself a reproach to my unworthy weakness? Shall a woman excel me in courage, and find comfort and solace in the exercise of her duty, leaving me so far distanced in the race for right as to degrade me in my own eyes? This should not, and must not be. I may find it difficult, if not impossible, to wear my mask becomingly, but the effort shall be made. I have too long forgotten that she is the wife of my benefactor. Yes, ever since circumstances have again thrown us together, although I may have striven to appear cold and in-

different, I have weakly yielded to regrets alike sinful and useless. We must part again, and for ever ; and meanwhile ——”

“Marston !” suddenly exclaimed the well-known voice of the Earl, who was evidently in search of him ; “my dear fellow, what are you doing here ? Are you awaiting some fair lady-love, or are you hatching treason against the State ? Lady Ravenswood has despatched me in pursuit of you, for she declares that she will no longer permit your truancy. You are consequently my prisoner ; nor shall I give you one hope of liberation until I deliver you into the keeping of my sovereign lady.”

Ferdinand had sprung up as the stately old man approached his hiding-place, and by a strong effort he cast off every remaining trace of emotion.

“Love and treason are alike grave charges ;” he said, forcing a smile. “I will, however, enter no plea against them ; but simply request of you to occupy for a few instants the seat I have just quitted, and then to tell me if the soft light and mellowed sounds to be enjoyed there do not render this spot a delicious resting-place amid the gaiety and glitter by which we are elsewhere surrounded.”

“To a man of my years ;” replied the Earl, as he adopted the suggestion of his companion ; “I freely and heartily admit it ; but you are too young, my dear Ferdinand, for such selfish indulgence in the very midst of a marriage-festival ; and above all, one which has been given in honour of your own sister.”

“Your lordship is right, as you ever are ;” said the self-rebuked Marston, who at once perceived that he had not only been discourteous, but even ungrateful ; “and I will hasten to repair my error. Where am I likely to find Lady Ravenswood ?”

“I left her in the crimson saloon, where she arranged to await my return. You have, therefore, only to promise that you will at once deliver yourself up as a deserter, and abide your punishment, while I will profit by your advice, and remain in my present comfortable nook for the next half hour ; for I have been so long unaccustomed to play the host on so large a scale, that I may be excused if I venture to confess to a considerable amount of fatigue.”

“As in duty bound, I am pledged ;” said Marston with affected playfulness ; and in another moment he had left the conservatory.

When he reached the apartment named by Lord Ravenswood, his eye instantly fell upon the young Countess, who occupied a couch of crimson satin at its upper extremity, over which flowed in vapoury, but voluminous draperies, her dress of white gauze, looped with pearls; a diadem of the same precious gems, surmounted by an aigrette of diamonds, glittered above her spotless forehead; her finely-moulded arms and her slender waist were alike encircled with brilliants; and her whole appearance was so pure and so ethereal, that she looked like some creature of the air, impalpable to human contact.

“At last, Mr. Greville-Marston;” she said with a smile, as she extended towards him two of her jewelled fingers. “I was almost beginning to imagine that you had been spirited away by the fairies. Do you know that you have been terribly remiss to-night?”

“I will endeavour to repair my error, but I find it extremely difficult to be gay.”

“Surely the temporary separation from Enna should not sadden you, when you reflect upon her happiness, and that she has become the wife of one of your fastest friends!”

“No;” replied Ferdinand, as he took the seat beside her to which she motioned him; “but of late I have always felt depressed in a ball-room: all is so hollow and so deceptive.”

“Perhaps you are right;” said Lady Ravenswood musingly; “but balls are not the only things that are hollow and deceptive in this world. Fairer promises than those held out by these flower-wreathed and light-teaming rooms have been broken. Here it can be at the worst but a momentary disappointment, while there are cases in which wilful deception may prove a lifelong misery. However, this is no moment for sentiment; and here, very *à propos*, comes the sparkling Jessie to rouse us from our culpable inaction. We are coming, my dear Miss Armitage;” she said gaily, as the fair girl, radiant with pleasure, entered the saloon leaning upon the arm of Innes Carlyon; “and Julien shall indulge us with the prettiest of his polkas. You are, I see, already provided with a partner, so I will lead the way with mine;” and placing her small ungloved hand in that of Marston, she rose, and prepared to join the dancers.

Poor Ferdinand! How bitterly, as he

found himself whirling amid the giddy throng with the slight and yielding form of Laura resting upon his arm, and her breath playing upon his cheek, did he recall that fatal night in Grosvenor Street, when she awaited his return from the boudoir of her mother to fulfil the same engagement. Then he had believed that she was all his own, until a few brief and agonising words from Mrs. Heathcote had dispelled the brilliant vision, and reduced him to despair; and now she was, indeed, clasped closely to him, but she was the wife of another; and even while they were thus in contact, they were in reality severed for life. It was a frightful mockery, but he endured the trial without a word or a sign to signify that he was rather living in the past than in the present; while the young Countess herself, possibly pursued by similar memories, gradually became less animated as the dance proceeded, at length declared herself fatigued, and requesting him to lead her to a seat, told him that she should expect him to devote himself for the remainder of the evening to the bridesmaids, towards whom he had evinced such slender gallantry.

And so Ferdinand, with an aching heart

and a throbbing brow, led first one and then another of the bright bevy of beauties to the waltz or the quadrille; but Laura danced no more, and both felt intense relief when the last carriage drove from the door.

CHAPTER V.

A PROVOCATION.

As nothing is much more comfortless than a habitually well-regulated household on the day succeeding a ball, it was unanimously agreed, when the guests of the Earl met at a late hour on the following morning, that the whole party should spend the day in the fresh air, and dine beside a famous cataract which they had previously proposed to visit. The waterfall was backed by a far-spreading wood on the verge of Lord Ravenswood's estate, near whose entrance stood the ivy-covered cottage of one of the keepers; and thus the ladies were secure of shade should the sun prove overpowering, and of shelter in the event of a change of weather. Saddle-horses and carriages were at once in requisition; and a general bustle succeeded to the languor which had threatened to prostrate the

overtaxed energies of the revellers. The flying footsteps of ladies' maids and valets, the noise of hammers, and the voices of workmen, resounded through the Castle. Light laughter and gay jests made the air vocal, as the expectant party awaited upon the lawn the arrival of their several equipages, and ventured the most varying prophecies upon the weather, and the "lion" which they were about to explore; and an hour had scarcely elapsed ere the fairy phaeton of the Countess, with its cream-coloured ponies and its two diminutive outriders, issued from the stable-yard, followed by the whole caravan.

We are not about to repeat the thrice-told tale of all that passed in that summer picnic; our business is only with its close. The cataract, with its majestic and awe-inspiring beauties, was duly explored; the leafy avenues of the forest, alive with birds, and redolent of shade and stillness, afforded a happy contrast to the glare and tumult of the impetuous waterfall; noon sobered into evening; and the shades of twilight were beginning to gather about the party ere they turned homeward, wearied and spent with over-exertion.

Marston had resisted every invitation to exchange his horse for a seat in one or other of the carriages. The day had been to him a most trying one ; sick at heart, the courtesies which he had been compelled to exert on all sides had exhausted his energies, and he longed for solitude. Springing, therefore, upon his gallant grey, he suffered the brilliant cavalcade to precede him for a few moments ; and then diverging from the direct road, he struck into a lateral clearing, caring little for the moment whither it might lead him, so that he could be for a brief time alone.

When he found himself thoroughly separated from his companions, Ferdinand suffered his bridle-rein to hang loosely upon the neck of his horse, who soon relaxed into a walking pace, which offered no interruption to his sad and dreamy thoughts ; and more than an hour elapsed ere he roused himself sufficiently to perceive that the woodland path along which he had thus heedlessly loitered had caused him to diverge very considerably from his direct road, and that night was already beginning to darken in the sky. Gathering up his bridle, he endeavoured to discover a nearer way to the Castle, but he was not sufficiently

acquainted with the neighbourhood to accomplish this desirable object for a considerable time; and it was consequently not until the moon, which chanced to be at the full, had woven her magic tracery among the branches, and flung her mosaic of light and shadow along the earth, that he suddenly found himself beside the Gothic lodge which commanded the principal approach to the lordly dwelling of Lord Ravenswood. The gates of the park were not yet closed, and setting spurs to his horse he galloped on, regardless that in his headlong speed he had started that of a cabriolet, which, in the increasing obscurity, he had failed to distinguish.

The said cabriolet contained no less a personage than Arthur Willoughby, who, at length released from his military duties, was also wending his way to the Castle, in a brown study, which was very rudely interrupted by the prancing and snorting of his startled thoroughbred. Now Arthur, who had produced no very favourable impression upon his brother-officers, and who regarded himself as an extremely ill-used individual, had, since the departure of his family from town, been gradually working himself into the belief that

he had been grievously ill-used by the Earl, and that it behoved the latter to further his interests and to secure his popularity, as a compromise for the injuries which he had inflicted upon him.

“He is bound;” he murmured to himself, as he sped on towards Ravenswood; “to do everything in his power to serve me, for has he not stood in the way of my prosperity and happiness? Has he not married my cousin, when I had every right to anticipate that I should have gained her hand—and fortune? Well, since thus it is, he must make me ample compensation: he *can* do it, and he *must* do it! My father appears to have turned me adrift, but I will be no waif to be hurled hither and thither on the ocean of life, and to be stranded at last like a rotten timber on the shore of ruin. He is a court-favourite; and no later than to-morrow I will urge him to exert his influence at the Horse Guards to push my fortunes. They have had the insolence to tell *me* that I have mistaken my profession; will they venture to say as much to *him*? For the honour of the family he ought to help me, and he *shall*. For upwards of twenty years he has been the firm friend

and patron of that puppy, Greville-Marston, who is the apple of his eye ; and who is now, no doubt, the chosen companion of my pretty cousin. I hate that man ! I loathe him ! but for him, Laura would never have become the wife of Lord Ravenswood. She would have been mine, and I should have been —— Well, well, I shall no doubt find an opportunity of thanking him ; and I *will* thank him after my own fashion ; and prove to those who are inclined to believe that I wear a sword only as a toy, that I know how to use it !”

He was absorbed in these reflections when the rapid approach of Marston’s horse produced the effect upon his own which has been already described ; and he had no sooner succeeded in reducing the fiery animal once more to obedience than he pulled up before the lodge, and loudly and angrily summoned the gate-keeper.

“ Who is the man who has just galloped headlong towards the Castle ?” he asked imperiously. “ Speak, fellow ! I am your lord’s cousin.”

“ That gentleman, sir, is Mr. Greville-Marston.”

“ You are quite sure of this ?”

"Quite, sir."

"Very well, that will do;" and Willoughby drove on with clenched teeth and labouring breath. Marston again! always Marston! Was that man continually to cross his path, and to wound his pride? No, he had already borne too much, he would bear no more! Opportunities would not be wanting to revenge himself; or, if they came not spontaneously, they might be made: and in this bitter frame of mind he alighted at the Castle.

Ere his arrival, however, the party had dispersed to their several apartments; and after having directed the butler to supply him with wine, of which he hastily drank off a couple of tumblers, he suffered himself to be conducted to his own.

As the breakfast-bell rang on the following morning Willoughby made his appearance, and received the apologies of his noble host for the apparent inhospitality of his overnight's reception, together with an explanation of its cause.

"It would appear;" was the uncourteous reply, as the young man carelessly shook hands with his parents, and then forced himself into a seat between the Countess and Miss

Armitage ; “ that I am fated to be always too late for everything in this world ! ” and, as he spoke, he glanced round the table with a dark and sullen look ; but he had no sooner convinced himself of the absence of Marston than he recovered his temper, and after having exchanged a few civil words with his cousin, and been presented to such of the guests as were strangers to him, he addressed his conversation exclusively to Lord Ravenswood, with whom he was anxious to ingratiate himself.

Had Arthur not been the relative of his wife, it is probable that even the indulgent nature of the Earl would have been over-taxed by the wearisome bad taste of his discourse, which ran exclusively upon his own adventures, both civil and military, during his stay in town ; but while the brow of Sir Marmaduke darkened, and the cheek of Lady Willoughby flushed, as they listened to his ill-judged communications, Lord Ravenswood sat with a stereotyped smile upon his lips, and evinced no symptom of displeasure. Ever ready to make all possible allowance for youth and high spirits, he would not suffer one evidence of disgust to escape him, although he carefully

abstained from encouraging, in the most trifling degree, the frivolous and egotistical rhodomontade of the young Guardsman.

Lady Ravenswood was, however, less tolerant; piqued and annoyed by the somewhat coarse tone and confident self-assertion of her cousin, she more than once attempted to restrain his volubility, and to give a more general turn to the conversation; but, unfortunately, Arthur Willoughby was as obtuse as he was self-confident, and a hint was as thoroughly lost upon him as a dew-drop would have been upon a withered plant.

The Honourable Saville Thornton listened and sneered. To him Arthur Willoughby was a new *genus* of obnoxious animal, very useless and very noisy. He talked about horses, dogs, and soldiers; subjects peculiarly distasteful to the self-centred old bachelor, who, himself a confirmed egotist, could not tolerate a second practitioner in the same line.

"You will be good enough to excuse me, sir;" he interposed at last, with a cold irony in his tone which would have silenced a moderately impertinent individual; "but I presume, from the extreme fearlessness and

candour with which you have asserted your opinions on military matters, that you have, despite your comparatively youthful appearance, already had considerable experience of a soldier's life ; roughed it at the Knightsbridge Barracks, and distinguished yourself in the laborious manœuvres at Aldershatt. It is really an advantage to enjoy the society of one so eminently gifted to enlarge upon themes with which we ignorant and innocent civilians are so little acquainted. The only circumstance which strikes me as singular being that 'Mr.' Arthur Willoughby, apparently ignoring the real name of the colonel of his regiment—who, by the way, chances to be an intimate friend of mine—should invariably speak of him as 'Old Wirewig.' I was really not aware that pleasantries of that facetious description were tolerated among gentlemen."

"Pay us a visit, and we will soon convince you that we have relieved our godfathers and godmothers from their responsibilities ;" was the unabashed reply.

The Earl rose from the table—he could endure no more ; and ere long the younger ladies were discussing in the morning-room

the programme for the day ; while, as Lord Ravenswood and Mr. Thornton mounted their horses to take their morning ride in the park, and Sir Marmaduke was deep in an angry expostulation with his wife on the subject of their hopeful son, that worthy himself sauntered forth, with his hands in his pockets, to the stable.

“ That’s a pretty bit of blood ; ” he remarked to the head-groom, as a superb Arabian, carefully clothed, was led out for exercise. “ Is that the Earl’s favourite charger ? ”

“ No, sir ; the horse belongs to Mr. Greville-Marston. He was a present from my lord was Firefly, and a fine animal he is.”

“ So he seems ; and I will save Tom, Dick, or Harry, as his name may happen to be, the trouble of taking him out this morning, for I will ride him myself.”

“ You, sir ? ”

“ Yes : do I not speak plain English ? I have taken a fancy to the brute, and feel inclined to try his paces.”

“ It would be more than my place is worth, sir ; ” said the man civilly ; “ to allow him to be mounted by any one but his master. He was originally purchased for my lady ; but as

he was too hot and eager to carry her safely, he was given to Mr. Marston, who is as fine a horseman as any in the country, and can manage him with a silken thread."

"Well, now then you will saddle him for me, and we shall see if one of Her Majesty's Life-Guards is not quite as capable of taking the devil out of him as the gentleman who procured him so cheaply."

"But really, sir ——"

"How, sirrah! do you dare to oppose the will of your lord's cousin?"

"I must do my duty," said the man doggedly.

"Do not run yourself into trouble, Mr. Fairbairn;" interposed the dapper little groom, who, mounted upon a steady hack, held the rein of the magnificent Arabian; "because you see this here affair only concerns me. I have received strict orders about Firefly, and I will obey them: no man shall throw a leg across the beauty, even though he were all my lord's cousins rolled into one, for I know that I shall be backed up in my refusal both by my master and his lordship himself."

"Then you deliberately refuse to obey my orders?"

"I do, sir; and I am sorry that they are such as places a poor man in an awkward situation when he is only trying to do what's right. There's the bay, sir: as sweet a thing as a gentleman ever crossed; shall Bill saddle her for your honour? She can trot fourteen miles an hour, and never turn a hair."

"Who does she belong to?" asked Arthur sullenly.

"To my lord, sir."

"No; I have no fancy for the bay. I will ride the Arab."

"I dare not allow it, sir."

"Have I not told you that I am your lord, or rather your lady's cousin? Do you suppose that Mr. Marston would refuse for a moment to accommodate me in so simple a matter? Had I a saddle-horse of my own here I would not trouble him for his; but under the circumstances I do not hesitate to do as I would be done by; and any man who would do otherwise is a churl."

"Shall I go and ask my master's leave, sir, to let you have the horse?"

"No: I would not pay Mr. Marston so poor a compliment. Saddle him at once, and I will explain to your master that you are altogether blameless in the affair."

The man muttered something which sounded strangely like an oath, as he lazily let himself down from the back of his hackney, and led the fiery Arabian once more to the stable. That he was doing wrong by disobeying the stringent orders which he had received upon the subject, he both felt and knew; but Willoughby's near relationship to the Countess, coupled with the species of respect which all professional grooms experience for a man who can appreciate a valuable horse, and who, moreover, owns one of his own, were at length sufficiently powerful to induce his obedience; and when, while Firefly, restless and indignant at this fresh transfer to the stable, was chafing and resisting the efforts of his attendant to prepare him for the road, Arthur Willoughby examined and caressed his splendid chestnut, who was evidently accustomed to his presence and care, the man became more reconciled to his breach of duty; and as he placed the reins in his hand, and assisted him to mount, he said with a half-appeased growl:—

“Well, sir, if it must be I suppose it must; and I do not think that Firefly could be in better hands, for you knows what you're about with horses, I'll be your warrant: and

he knows, too, when he's got his master upon his back. His mouth's as fine as a hair, sir, and he'll carry you as you haven't often been carried before."

"No doubt of it;" said Arthur, as he sprang into his seat; "we shall spend a pleasant hour or two together; and should Mr. Marston inquire either for his horse or for me, you can tell him that he will see us both again before luncheon." And with a light rein and a light laugh the young Guardsman cantered away.

"So, so;" he muttered to himself as he passed the lodge and reached the public road; "you were purchased, it seems, for my pretty cousin, who, having a convenient fit of womanly nervousness, transferred you to Mr. Greville-Marston, having no relation of her own to whom such a gift might be acceptable! We shall see—we shall see."

Three hours afterwards the noble Arabian arrived at Ravenswood Castle with a dislocated shoulder and broken knees.

Misfortunes *will* happen in the best regulated families.

CHAPTER VI.

A QUARREL.

It was with a faint heart and trembling voice that Marston's groom announced to his master the disaster which had happened to his favourite and highly-valued horse; but the latter restrained himself sufficiently to reply almost with calmness:—

“You see, Maxwell, the result of your disobedience to my express orders. But I am not about to treat you with severity. I am ready to admit that your position was one of some difficulty, and to make allowances for you accordingly. Go now, and shoot the poor animal; for I can neither bear to look at it again, nor to know that it is in suffering, for which there is no alleviation save death.”

“Aye, sir, I fear that nothing better can be done with him;” was the reply; “but the noble beast has been ill-used, or his feet never

would have failed him. There has been foul play, or my name is not Bill Maxwell."

"Not another word upon the subject;" said Marston sternly. "A gentleman may be unfortunate enough to meet with a misfortune of this nature; but to suspect that it took place designedly would be to question his honour. Poor Firefly! Poor fellow! I would have given his weight in gold to have spared him this."

"And gold well laid out, too, sir;" growled the groom, as bitterly as he could give utterance to his indignation; "and right thankful am I that you do not altogether blame me for his death. But who could have believed, sir, that an officer of the Life Guards ——"

"Once more, I say, not another word, Maxwell; and I expect to be obeyed. Go instantly, and release the noble animal from pain."

The man obeyed; and Marston turned away, involuntarily murmuring to himself:

"Woe worth the hour, woe worth the day,
That caused thy death, my gallant grey!"

"So we meet at last, Mr. Greville-Marston;" said Arthur Willoughby, entering the

hall as the former was about to quit it. "You are no very early riser, it seems; and perhaps you are right; for a man cannot be much more comfortable than with his head upon his pillow!"

"Provided his dreams are pleasant, Mr. Willoughby."

"Oh, exactly so! pretty women, your friend's wife, and all that sort of thing."

"I seldom dream of my friends' wives;" said Marston with admirable temper; "and consequently cannot decide the exact amount of enjoyment to be derived from such visions."

"Well, we will leave the subject of dreams for that of realities. I just now saw your groom leave the house, and I presume that he has informed you of my little mischance this morning."

"He has."

"Confound the brute! he nearly broke my neck, and therefore earned his fate. Of course I am very sorry for what has happened, and should have offered to make good his loss; but as I have ascertained that he cost you nothing, I cannot insult you by talking about compensation, either in money or horse-flesh."

Marston was silent.

"Moreover," pursued his companion insolently, "you are such a squire of dames that a more sober-paced palfrey must be better suited to you; and you are too deeply interested in securing the favour of the ladies to run the risk of startling their nerves by the gymnastic performances of your horse."

"I do not understand your meaning, Mr. Willoughby."

"It would appear that I am peculiarly obscure this morning, as, under other circumstances, you would at once have comprehended my allusion."

"I confess," said Ferdinand, with a contemptuous smile; "that I am quite at a loss to do so."

"Ah, I see; you understand the women best. That is obvious enough, and answers your purpose much better."

Marston looked steadily into the face of his interlocutor without vouchsafing any reply.

"So you really affect to depend on me for an explanation?" said Willoughby, as his eyes sank before those of the man whom he was thus wilfully insulting. "You are too modest, Mr. Marston; the riddle is easily read."

“And yet I confess myself too obtuse even to guess at its solution.”

“Oh! do not wrong your natural intelligence;” exclaimed Arthur savagely, his temper failing altogether beneath the disdainful calmness of his companion. “The gentleman who so skilfully exercises his talents in marrying and giving in marriage wealthy heiresses in their minority to seedy noblemen in their dotage—granddaughters to their grandpapas—can scarcely be so very dull of apprehension.”

“Mr. Willoughby!” said Ferdinand; “I was, as I need scarcely say, altogether unprepared for so unwarrantable an attack as you have seen fit to make upon me. I know little or nothing of you; I have never interfered in anything with which you were in the most remote degree connected; and I was at first anxious to believe that you were jesting—bad taste as you would have exhibited in jesting with a comparative stranger: but now, when you appear disposed to include other persons in your offensive sarcasms—persons who are justly dear and sacred in my eyes, and who ought to be equally so in yours—I tell you, at once and deliberately, that I will

not permit you to utter one word derogatory to their honour and dignity. Let this conversation cease, therefore. I perfectly forgive you the insults offered to myself, both in act and words, because I would not degrade the home of Lord Ravenswood into a scene of brawl and discord, and I sincerely advise you to be equally reasonable."

"That advice sounds wonderfully like a menace, Mr. Greville-Marston."

"I never either offer or fear a menace, Mr. Willoughby!"

"I differ from you then ; for I can both utter a threat and realise it. However, words are idle ;" pursued the young Guardsman doggedly. "I consider that you have injured me ; and it was to tell you so that I came here at the close of your very agreeable gaieties. Any one, save myself, might perhaps be less frank, but I am no lover of circumlocution and hypocrisy ; and therefore I say at once, without further preamble, that you have either had a personal interest in furthering a marriage which was at once a scandal and a mockery, but which answered some purpose of your own ; or that you are a coward, who——"

“Do not finish your sentence,” interposed Marston. “Do not utter another word, or you may drive me to forget under whose roof I stand.”

“I care little what it may please you to forget or to remember;” exclaimed the furious Arthur, with clenched hands and labouring breath. “I shall not await your permission to tell you my opinion of yourself and your proceedings;—or you are a coward, I repeat, who have flung a rich and lovely woman into the arms of a dotard, in order to further your own peculiar and libertine views.”

“Sir!” hissed Ferdinand between his firmly-set teeth; “you are a miserable ruffian, a vile calumniator, who disgraces the sword he wears!”

“Good! very good!” laughed back Willoughby exultingly. “Even you then, it seems, can be roused at last. I began to fear that your blood had stagnated in your veins, and that you were beyond or below the honourable feelings of a man. When and where shall we meet?”

“Now, and in the southern plantation;” replied Marston, calmed at once by the ignoble violence of his coarse-minded antagonist; “What arms do you prefer?”

"I will trust to the sword, which I will compel you to admit that I do not disgrace."

"So be it. And our seconds?"

"We can, I imagine, dispense with more than one witness. Jackson, my father's man, is an old soldier. It will renew his youth to smell blood once more, and he will incur little risk of a disappointment."

"Be good enough, then, to direct him to follow us."

"I will; and in ten minutes I shall be ready."

"And I in five."

A ceremonious bow was exchanged, and the young men parted.

CHAPTER VII.

A DUEL.

MARSTON was constitutionally brave. He would have rushed through the flames of a burning house, or sprung overboard at sea, to save the life of a fellow-creature; but as he turned away from the man who had goaded him on to a personal encounter by his ribald allusion to one who was dearer to him than his own existence, he felt a pang which no bodily suffering could have inflicted. How often had he heard Lord Ravenswood declare that he regarded a duellist simply as a kid-gloved and silk-cravated murderer! How often had he vowed to himself that no affront should ever induce him to stand in cold blood, armed against his fellow-man! but now—now—when the fair fame of his heart's idol, of the woman, to secure whose happiness and honour he would have died a thousand deaths,

had been impugned, he must have been more or less than human had he shrunk from the ordeal.

He had asked, or rather named, only a few short minutes to prepare himself for the encounter. It might be a fatal one; and in his secret heart Marston almost hoped that it would prove so; for life had for many months been to him as bitter as the waters of Marah: but still human nature will assert itself; and it is wonderful how, when the possible moment of annihilation draws near, the heart clings by a myriad of minute links to affections and associations, which it cannot fling off without intense suffering and regret. With Marston this was peculiarly the case, for he was at war with himself, and felt a bitter consciousness that, in the indulgence of one overmastering passion, he had neglected many of his social duties to those who were both near and dear to him. Enna, her husband, and the Earl, had all claims on his affection and regard, which he had apparently neglected; while even Laura herself had cause of complaint against him, for he had betrayed, on several occasions, a weakness which, even although it might have failed (as he had

cause to fear that it had done) to extinguish her affection, must have diminished her respect for his character, and induced her to blush at her pertinacious clinging to one no longer worthy of her preference.

And then, for what had he hitherto lived? What had he accomplished? Literally, nothing. He had suffered himself to be prostrated by his first trial; and if he had been enabled to secure the prosperity of his sister, he owed the fact, not to any exertion of his own, but to the casual circumstance by which he had been unexpectedly enriched; while he was conscious that nothing is more easy or more pleasurable than to bestow on others that which entails no sacrifice upon ourselves.

All these reflections and regrets were useless now, however; and it was some poor consolation to him to remember that, in the morbidity of a sick mind and a weary heart, he had already made such legal arrangements as would secure his recently-acquired wealth to Enna and her heirs: nor was he altogether insensible to a feeling of satisfaction that the time accorded to him, before the hostile meeting with Willoughby, was too short to enable him to pour out those farewells upon paper,

which are anguish to the writer, and the most painful memorials that can be bequeathed to his friends. For what can the voluntary suicide or murderer offer in extenuation of his contempt of divine law, and disobedience to the divine command, which can soften the blow that he deliberately inflicts? What can the duellist advance, which will wash away the stain from his soul, and give back his memory in its pristine purity; or encourage those, thus voluntarily abandoned to their grief, to feel that *his* trials, at least, are over, and that he rests in peace?

Marston was right. Such leave-takings should never be indulged in; for they are, at best, but a vain mockery, when the sentiments that they express have not possessed sufficient power to prevent the crime which they are inefficient to extenuate; and therefore it was well that time failed him, and that he was not compelled to wring either the feelings of his friends or his own.

That Willoughby should have proposed a combat with swords was something too monstrous and too un-English for comment; and the very enormity of the arrangement convinced his antagonist of the virulence of his

hatred ; but he had scorned to offer any objection, caring little, if he were, indeed, destined to fall by the hand of an unscrupulous bully, whether he met his death by lead or steel.

Marston was essentially a man of nerve, but he had hitherto had little experience of any weapon of offence. He could neither drive a bullet through the ace of clubs, nor guide a rapier to a given point ; and it consequently gave him slight concern, when he casually reflected on the unmanly advantage which had been taken of him. He had no thirst for the blood of Laura's cousin ; and he shrank from the possibility of becoming an alien from the heart and home of his life-long benefactor, by rendering himself the murderer of his wife's relative.

" No ;" he murmured resignedly ; " if there must be a victim, better that it should be me—the dishonoured son of a dishonoured father. Enna will soon console herself in the love of her husband. Laura will forget me, although she may, perchance, weep for a time over my fate. And he, too, my adversary, he has parents, who would mourn for him—a father, upon whom no taint of crime has ever rested : a mother, of whom he is

the hope and pride. Better, far better, that he should escape unscathed, than one who has little more to ask of this life."

Thus meditating Marston entered the armoury of the Castle, where he detached from the nail to which it was suspended, a cavalry sabre belonging to the Earl, flung a cloak over his shoulders to conceal it, and calmly proceeded to the place of meeting. He was the first upon the ground; but he had not long to wait. Willoughby, followed at a short distance by the veteran who was to witness the encounter, in a few minutes sauntered towards him with a cigar between his lips, and a wild glare in his eyes, which at once betrayed to Ferdinand the fact that he had occupied the brief time that had elapsed since they parted, in swallowing more wine than at that early period of the day his brain was competent to contend against. This fact, brutalising as it was, confirmed Marston in his decision to act only on the defensive; as, in his high and chivalric right-mindedness, he persuaded himself that the superior skill of his antagonist must be more than negated by the prostration of his intellectual strength.

He little knew the nature with which he had to deal.

“ You’ll excuse me, I hope, gentlemen;” said the ex-sergeant, as the belligerents stood face to face upon the greensward, with the flexible branches of a group of lime-trees dancing and quivering in the light breeze above their heads; and the perfume of some flowering thorns scenting the atmosphere with their delicious fragrance; “ but I don’t quite like the notion of your using swords upon such an occasion as this. It’s too French and butchering for our country; and, moreover, as I suppose that the affair has been got up in a hurry, when you must, one or other of you, have been unprepared, it is scarcely possible that your weapons can be so precisely similar as to render the duel a fair one: in which case I absolutely refuse to become a party to it. As to skill, Mr. Arthur, that must be on your side, as a matter of course; and even that fact gives long odds in your favour; but that is the only advantage which the son of your father must condescend to take over an honourable adversary. If, therefore, I should be correct about your arms, I care not how it may fall out; but I will insist

upon fair play on both sides. Gentlemen, I must measure your swords."

"Have done with this cant, Jackson;" angrily exclaimed Willoughby: "old as you are, you need not disgrace your cloth."

"And it is because I will not disgrace it, or suffer it to be disgraced in my presence, Mr. Arthur, that I have come to the resolution I have named. I did not volunteer my presence at this unfortunate meeting, but followed you, in obedience to your orders; and it is therefore for you to decide whether I shall remain on the ground, or, by quitting the spot, leave you to conclude, after your own fashion, an encounter which will place both parties in an awkward and suspicious position, terminate as it may. Now, gentlemen, what is your resolution?"

Marston stepped a pace forward, and tended his sword to the veteran; an example which Willoughby, after some hesitation, reluctantly and sullenly followed. The old soldier poised the weapons in his hand; and then, laying them upon the ground, measured them jealously from hilt to point.

"It is as I thought probable;" he said firmly: "you cannot fight with these. You,

"And you, sir?" asked the veteran, as he turned towards Ferdinand.

"I am entirely at Mr. Willoughby's disposal."

"In that case, gentlemen;" said Jackson, plunging his hand into the pocket of his great-coat, and producing a small brass-bound case, containing a pair of pistols; "I fear that these are your only alternative."

"Are they loaded?" inquired Arthur eagerly.

"They are."

"Withdraw the charges then, and reload them. I am no fool, either to be gulled like a boy, or to become the victim of an ignorant mistake."

The sergeant silently obeyed; after which he covered the pistols with a handkerchief, and each of the young men withdrew his own.

While Jackson was measuring the ground, Willoughby took out his cigar-case, and coolly lighted another cigar: after which he looked to the priming of his pistol, and then sauntered to a short distance, puffing slight streaks of smoke into the air. Meanwhile, Marston stood motionless; and just above his head a

thrush gave out its gushing song, thrilling and warbling with all the might of its tiny throat.

"Is he chaunting my requiem?" murmured Ferdinand to himself; "if so, death will surely prove sweeter than life!"

"Be so good as to remove that white handkerchief from your breast-pocket, sir; and to button up your coat;" said the veteran, as he approached him; "you should always present one uniform dark surface to your antagonist on such occasions as this. I once knew a man who lost his life by a plated button just above his heart."

Marston bent his head courteously, and mechanically did as he was instructed.

When Willoughby, having nearly exhausted his cigar, lazily loitered back, Ferdinand, so lately cautioned on his own imprudence, instinctively remarked that his adversary had been less reckless. His black morning coat was closely buttoned from throat to waist; and every article of dress that he wore was of the same sombre tint, even to his tightly-fitting gloves.

"Will you not shake hands, gentlemen, before you exchange fire?" asked the ex-

sergeant solemnly. "You may never have an opportunity of doing so again."

Once more Marston made a forward movement; but Arthur, superciliously removing for an instant the cigar from his lips, said carelessly, "I am really very sorry that I cannot comply with your suggestion; but, as you may perceive, both my hands are engaged."

The witness had done his duty; and pointing to the two peeled wands which he had inserted in the grass, he stepped a few paces backward.

The young men took their ground.

The summer sky was above them. The wealth of summer foliage was around them. Song-birds, careless in their accustomed impunity, were carolling above their heads. They stood upon a soil which should have been sacred to both, for it was the property of their host and friend. And how stood they there? Prepared to abuse the privileges of hospitality and affection; to make that summer nook, dear to meditation and to peace, the arena of blood and strife; to desecrate the very soil, which should have been holy in their eyes; and to leave for evermore a

dark and murderous tradition attached to the home of him who had welcomed them to his heart and roof.

Marston felt the warm blood curdle in his breast as he remembered this, and became at once conscious that he had only one alternative, by which he instantly resolved, at all risks, to abide. Another moment, and two simultaneous reports startled the song-birds from their leafy coverts. Ferdinand had fired in the air, but Willoughby had taken a more vengeful aim; and the brother of Enna, the adopted son of Lord Ravenswood, and the secret idol of Laura's heart, after staggering for a few seconds like a drunken man, fell heavily to the earth.

"Save yourself, Mr. Arthur!" shouted Jackson, as he sprang to the assistance of the stricken man; "and never forget, to your dying day, that he did not raise his hand against you."

"Confound the fool! What did he mean by such womanly nonsense?" exclaimed Willoughby impatiently. "If a man chooses to make a target of himself, I cannot be responsible."

"Mr. Arthur;" said the old soldier up-

braidingly ; “ it ill becomes me to say a harsh word to my master’s son ; but pray, sir, pray that the deed of to-day may be blotted out ; for it is, I trust, the darkest in your history. He fired in the air, sir. Remember that I stood by, and could not be mistaken ; while you—you—no doubt you did not remark this, took good aim, and you see, sir,—you see the result of your encounter. I do not,—I dare not—judge between you.”

“ You are not required to do so, and have presumed quite sufficiently this morning ; ” was the impatient reply. “ All I now wish to ascertain before I leave the Castle is, whether the fellow is really dead.”

“ I do not believe that he has many minutes to live.”

“ Then I suppose that I had better cut at once. Remember, Jackson, that you have been the only witness of this affair, and you will be silent for your own sake.”

“ If not for my own sake, Mr. Arthur, I will for yours ; ” replied the veteran ; “ for should your poor mother ever learn the history of the last half-hour, it would break her heart.”

“ She never need learn it, for we are neither of us likely to volunteer the intelligence.”

"*I* may, however, feel less inclined to keep your secret, sir;" said one of Lord Ravenswood's gamekeepers, as he emerged from the clump of limes and hawthorns beside which the young men had stood for an instant previous to their encounter.

Arthur started and looked round.

"What do you mean, sirrah," he exclaimed angrily; "by playing the spy upon gentlemen?"

"I was not playing the spy, Mr. Wilmoughby; I was in that cover in the performance of my duty."

"So, then, you know me too? Better and better! At how much do you value your silence?"

"Is Mr. Marston dead?" asked the intruder, totally disregarding the question of Arthur, and bending over the body of Ferdinand, whose head rested upon the knees of the veteran, while the latter, with well-practised skill, was engaged in staunching with his handkerchief the blood that was slowly oozing from the breast of the victim.

"Not yet," whispered Jackson.

"Is there a chance of saving him?"

"A very poor one, I fear; but while there is life there is hope."

"Well, sir;" said the keeper, at length replying to the inquiry of Willoughby; "for my lord's sake, so long as there is life in poor Mr. Marston, I will be as silent as the grave without any bribe from you. I want no blood-money; but if murder has really been done, I will keep no murderer's secret, you may depend upon it."

"Do you mean to threaten me, you rascal?"

"Well, sir, mayhap I do; and I shall make an ugly witness, *that* you may take your oath of; for I would sooner have lost my left hand than seen Mr. Marston lying there as he does now."

"Mr. Arthur, I do entreat of you to leave this place without further delay;" said the veteran earnestly; "you will find your horse ready saddled, as I took the precaution to give the order in the event of any misfortune. Do, sir, start at once; and you, my good fellow, run to the Castle, ask to see my lord, tell him that Mr. Marston has met with a serious accident, and bring back with you a litter and a couple of men to assist us in carrying it."

The keeper nodded, and was off on his errand in an instant.

“One word with you, sir, before you leave us ;” said Arthur, recalling him. “I am not quite such an idiot as to trust to your sentimental assurances. Make yourself as useful here as you can till I have had ten minutes’ start of you, and then you may fetch all the household as soon as you please.”

“Right, right ;” muttered Jackson ; “it must be so ; and yet I wish that we could have had help at once.”

“And so you shall ;” said the keeper sturdily, as Willoughby moved away ; “have no fear, you may trust me. But what shall I say to my lord if he should ask any questions ?”

“There is no chance of that ;” replied the ex-sergeant ; “the shock will be too great at the first moment ; and while you are away,” he added, replacing the pistols in their case, and thrusting it into his pocket ; “I will consider what is best to be done. Say nothing more than that you heard a shot, and, hastening to learn its cause, were despatched by me for assistance.”

CHAPTER VIII.

A PAGE FROM THE WORLD'S VOLUME.

ARTHUR WILLOUGHBY found his horse ready for him as the ex-sergeant had told him that he would do ; and he vaulted into the saddle and galloped off, just as the messenger of evil tidings despatched by the veteran, reached the stable-yard on his way to the servants' offices. As the reckless young man recognised the breathless keeper he triumphantly shook his blood-stained hand, and struck the spurs still deeper into the flanks of the fiery animal. In another moment he turned an angle of the road, and was out of sight.

The consternation created by the fearful tale that now spread through the Castle cannot be described. Marston was a general favourite ; and while the Earl sat for a few instants perfectly stunned by the fatal intelligence, busy hands were already arranging a sofa-mattress upon a

wooden frame, upon which to remove the unfortunate Ferdinand to the Castle. Suddenly Lord Ravenswood roused himself, and fixing his eyes sternly upon the keeper, who remained standing before him to await his orders, he asked, in a deep, unnatural voice,—

“Does he still live? No tampering with me, I *will* know the truth!”

“Indeed he did, my lord, when I left him; but ——”

“Enough!” exclaimed the Earl, springing to his feet; “not a moment must be lost! Lead the way; I am ready to follow you. My poor, poor Ferdinand!”

“Shall I send for medical advice at once, my lord?” asked the grief-stricken butler, as he handed him his hat, which, in the anguish of the moment, he had forgotten.

“Send for all the doctors in the county!” gasped out Lord Ravenswood; “and telegraph for Bransby Cooper without the delay of an instant!”

“And will your lordship also authorise me to send a message to Mrs. Augustus Carlyon?” again demanded the old man.

“To any one—every one, who should be apprised of this fatal catastrophe, Southwood;”

was the agitated reply ; "and now delay me no longer. One brief moment, and I may be too late to receive his dying embrace !"

The mournful cavalcade set forth ; but the eagerness of the Earl soon caused him to outstrip all his attendants save the faithful keeper, who, dashing away the large drops from eyes which had for years forgotten how to weep, followed at a half-run the vigorous strides of his master.

As he reached the spot where the manly form of Ferdinand lay stretched upon the grass, partially supported upon the knees of the veteran Jackson, the Earl uttered a low groan, and flung himself down beside him. Trembling with haste and terror, he pressed his hand upon the poor fluttering heart, and it might be that the touch of one who was dear to him as a father produced some mesmeric effect upon the victim, who raised his heavy eyelids for a second, and strove to smile. Lord Ravenswood averted his head ; he could not support that smile. Was it, indeed, to be the last ? Was the silver cord about to be snapped, and the golden bowl broken ?

With a sigh of anguish he covered his face, and then "the strong man wept." Well

was it that he did so, for that gush of emotion tended to calm him; and when the bearers had set down their litter, he was even able to assist them in placing upon it the once more inanimate body of his ward.

Slowly and sadly the party then commenced their return to the Castle, but not before the Earl had cast a searching and suspicious glance around him. Thanks, however, to the precaution of the ex-sergeant, there was nothing unusual to be seen in any direction save the crushed grass which had been borne down by the weight of his own body and that of Ferdinand. The birds, long accustomed to an impunity which had rendered them fearless, were still singing among the branches; and all in that lovely and secluded spot, save the group by which it was then occupied, was redolent of beauty and of peace.

At length the Castle was reached, and the unconscious object of so much care and love was borne tenderly to his chamber; and there, beside his bed, with one hand clutching the damask curtains, and the other sweeping away the disordered masses of hair which hung tangled and heavy over her brow and cheeks, stood the young Countess, whose eyes no

sooner fell upon what she conceived to be the corpse of Ferdinand, than, with a wild shriek, she rushed forward, and, throwing herself into the arms of her husband, buried her pale face upon his shoulder.

Alas! not even the voice of his heart's idol had power to awaken Marston now! There he lay, his profusion of rich curls clinging with the dank moisture of physical suffering to his noble forehead, the breast of his shirt dabbled with blood, his graceful limbs flaccid and nerveless, his lips apart, and his white teeth flashing from between them with a glitter which was almost ghastly. At a sign from the housekeeper, Lord Ravenswood lifted his wife in his arms and carried her from the room.

Lady Willoughby and her niece were waiting to receive her in her own apartment; where the elder lady, having administered a powerful opiate to her patient, and drawn the curtains closely round her bed, consigned her to the care of her maid, with strict injunctions not to suffer any one to enter her chamber until the arrival of a physician; and then, this duty performed, she descended to the drawing-room with Miss Cleveland, eager to gather all

the information she could obtain on the subject of poor Marston's misfortune. Had she entertained the slightest suspicion of her son's complicity in the catastrophe, she would possibly have been less inquisitive. In vain, however, did she question the servants by whom the bell was answered; no one knew anything more than that Mr. Marston had been found by Jackson, Sir Marmaduke's own gentleman, weltering in his blood on the grass in the Elm Glade.

"Send Jackson here!" grumbled the fat voice of the Baronet, who chanced to be the only occupant of the drawing-room when the two ladies returned to it.

A short delay took place; as the veteran, when thus summoned, was engaged in removing the clothes of the wounded man, assisted by the Earl himself; but at length he made his appearance.

"Come in, Jackson, and close the door behind you;" whispered Lady Willoughby. "You, of course;" she pursued, when her directions had been obeyed; "are acquainted with all the circumstances of this mysterious affair, and you are in duty bound to communicate them to your master."

"Indeed, my lady ——" interposed the old soldier.

"No circumlocution or mystery, if you please;" insisted the lady with asperity; "whatever you may wish to conceal from the other inmates of this house, you have no right to conceal from *us*."

"I assure you, my lady ——" again commenced the ex-sergeant, but once more he was silenced.

"Jackson;" said Sir Marmaduke, "your mistress is right, and you can scarcely hope to deceive *me*. You were found just after the report of a pistol-shot—for I maintain from the nature and position of the wound that it *was* a pistol-shot—supporting the dying, or, as I take it for granted I may now say, the dead man up-stairs, and staunching the blood from his wound. I am very sorry for the accident which has taken place; very sorry indeed—of course; although neither Lady Willoughby nor myself have any especial reasons for feeling more than a common regard for the unhappy young gentleman. Speak without fear, therefore, and tell us the true facts of the case."

"Certainly, Sir Willoughby;" replied the

stolid veteran, who had already determined on his line of action ; “ you had dismissed me, sir, as you may remember, from your dressing-room, and not feeling very well about my head, I thought that I could not do better than go out into the fresh air at once ; and as I had never before wandered in the direction of what I have been told to-day is called the Elm Glade, I struck into the path that leads to it ; and I could not have been more than a hundred paces from it, although it was hidden by a clump of trees and underwood, when I heard a shot fired, followed by a faint groan, or rather by a gasping sort of sigh, with which my former service had rendered me only too familiar ; and rushing forward to ascertain what had happened, I saw young Mr. Marston lying on the ground senseless.”

“ With a pistol beside him ? ” prompted the Baronet.

“ I saw no pistol when I lifted him up, Sir Marmaduke ; ” was the quiet rejoinder of the old soldier ; “ nor did either my lord or I discover such a thing when we left the ground, although I watched his lordship looking carefully round him before he left the place, as though he suspected a duel. However, he

was soon satisfied that that was out of the question by his manner; and now, sir, I believe that we must wait for Mr. Marston's recovery to understand the affair; and that *if* he should never recover, we shall never know more about it than we do now."

"Nonsense and folly!" exclaimed Lady Willoughby pettishly; "send my son to me, and make him aware that I am anxious for him to investigate this affair. He will very soon ascertain all that it is important for us to know."

"Mr. Willoughby started for town early this morning, my lady, having received a letter from the adjutant of his regiment, urging his immediate return; and I was instructed to tell your ladyship and my master how very sorry he was that he could not wait to take leave of you."

"Very strange indeed!" murmured the Baronet; "I don't understand such unnecessary haste. Arthur must have had some important reason for ——"

"Mr. Willoughby told me, Sir Marmaduke;" broke in the ex-sergeant, with very suspicious eagerness; "that he had orders not to delay a moment."

The old gentleman, evidently apprehensive that there was some mystery in the sudden disappearance of his son, looked steadily into the face of the veteran ; but he might as well have sought for information on the surface of a stone wall, so perfect was the self-possession of his astute attendant.

“ Well ;” said Lady Willoughby, who was troubled by no such suspicions ; “ if Arthur was to be recalled to town, it could not have happened at a better moment ; for this unfortunate business will, of course, put an end to everything like gaiety, and he would have found his visit here a very stupid affair. For my own part, I think the best thing we can do, Sir Marmaduke, will be to write at once to Mrs. Gore Cunningham, telling her what has occurred, and that we shall avail ourselves of her invitation to-morrow. As to remaining in the house with a corpse, I have not nerve for it, and it is quite out of the question.”

“ But Laura, my dear ?——”

“ What of Laura ? She will, of course, also make her escape. The young man will be properly attended to while he *does* live ; and Lady Ravenswood can scarcely be ex-

pected to spend her time in nursing her husband's ward. Besides, they can send for his sister; she is the proper person to take charge of him."

"But had we not better remain, at all events, until she arrives?" urged the more considerate Baronet.

"Certainly not; and so convinced am I that I am right in my view of the case, that I shall feel it my duty, situated as I am here, to suggest the immediate departure of the other guests, who, you may rely on it, will only be too much obliged to me for doing so; for when people have prepared themselves for amusement, they are never particularly pleased to be called upon to nurse the sick, or to bury the dead. For my own part, I wish that this hot-headed and imprudent young man had never returned to England; for whether he has fought a duel, or awkwardly injured himself by his own carelessness, he has contrived to make everybody else uncomfortable."

"At what hour did Mr. Willoughby leave the Castle?" inquired Sir Marmaduke abruptly.

"Immediately after the letter-bag was opened, sir."

"And who opened the letter-bag?"

"My lord always opens it himself, Sir Marmaduke!"

"And did his lordship deliver the letter to my son?"

"I think not, sir, as there were several others upon the breakfast-table."

The Baronet looked uneasy.

"Did Mr. Willoughby say that he expected to be delayed long in town?" was his next question.

"Yes, Sir Marmaduke. He told me that he thought it likely he should not be able to return until you had left the Castle."

Jackson was at length dismissed, to his great relief; and then Lady Willoughby calmly sat down to her desk, and informed her charming friend Mrs. Gore Cunningham of the "unfortunate casualty" which had occurred, and of her own consequent change of plan.

But if she, who rejoiced to feel that her unexpected exodus from Ravenswood Castle did not involve the necessity of her return to her own house, did not experience any very remarkable regret in quitting the sumptuous and hospitable roof which she had already

resolved should be her occasional home, it was far otherwise with her niece ; for a transfer to the Moat-House also inflicted upon poor Miss Cleveland a separation from the Honourable Saville Thornton, to whom she had devoted so many weary hours, and upon whom she had lavished so many tender glances, without having brought him to the point to which she was anxious to lead him ; and as at the close of the conversation just recorded she turned away to the window, it was not without a strong effort that she could repress her tears.

It was a happy circumstance that she *did* turn to the window, and a still happier one that in the course of a few minutes she chanced to look out of it ; for there, on the lawn, stood the Honourable Saville, evidently at a loss to know how to dispose of himself ; and the gesture was so expressive with which he greeted her appearance, that in a quarter of an hour they were walking in one of the shrubberies side by side, and hand in hand, like a very mature imitation of the babes in the wood.

CHAPTER IX.

SUSPENSE.

WHILE Lady Willoughby, the aunt of Laura, was indulging her curiosity, or at least endeavouring to do so, instead of watching over her suffering niece, sweet little Jessie Armitage had established herself at the bedside of her friend, anxious and tearful, but full of that beautiful devotedness which, in seasons of trial, makes woman "a ministering angel." Jessie could not understand the possibility of abandoning one she loved when the care and sympathy which divest grief and pain of their worst bitterness was most needed; and when the soft touch of a gentle hand, and the low murmur of a familiar voice, can pour balm into the wounded spirit. And yet she, poor girl, guessed not how deep and how despairing was the anguish which she thus compelled herself to witness.

"The shock has been frightful, Martin!" she whispered to the favourite attendant of the Countess; "and your lady was not yet sufficiently strong to bear up against it. I shall be so rejoiced when her physician arrives!"

"And I do hope, ma'am;" was the earnest reply; "that every one will leave the Castle. I am sure that neither my lord nor her ladyship will be fit to entertain company while the poor dear young gentleman is lying on his bed neither dead nor alive. Never, surely, was there anything so dreadful; and to think, too, that it should happen at such a time. Poor Mrs. Carlyon! I quite dread her coming—and she may be here to-morrow!"

Jessie burst into a fresh flood of tears.

"Pray, ma'am! pray do not give way!" expostulated the waiting woman. "You see the state that my lady is in, and we shall all look to you to comfort Mrs. Carlyon. It is her first grief, and it is a heavy one."

"Oh, that he may only live!" exclaimed Jessie earnestly; "his life is so precious to all who know him. But is it possible, Martin, that nothing has been discovered

which can throw a light upon this fatal business?"

"Nothing, ma'am! though I strongly suspect that Mr. Jackson could tell us all about it if he chose to do so; and, depend upon it, that it was no accident. That Mr. Marston was shot is certain, but where was the gun? and how came Sir Marmaduke's gentleman to be close by at the very moment?"

"What do you suspect, Martin?" was the eager inquiry.

"Do not ask me, Miss Armitage! It is not for me to say what I think."

"But you cannot surely imagine that Jackson tried to murder poor Mr. Marston?"

"Oh, no, ma'am; no one could dream of that for an instant."

"How unfortunate it was that Mr. Willoughby should have left the Castle before the misfortune occurred;" said Jessie, rather speaking to herself than addressing her companion.

Martin turned away, and bent over her suffering mistress.

"I am better now;" suddenly gasped out the young Countess. "Is all over? Tell me

the truth, for this suspense is worse than death."

"Indeed, my dear Lady Ravenswood, Mr. Marston was still alive when Martin last went to inquire;" said Jessie, pressing her lips to the pale cheek which rested on the pillow; "we will not deceive you; and she shall now go and make fresh inquiries. Perhaps some medical man has arrived by this time."

"Jessie!" murmured Laura, as she swept back the heavy masses of dishevelled hair from her damp forehead; "life is very wearisome. Young as I am, how gladly would I lay it down, and be at rest."

"Hush!" said Miss Armitage solemnly; "your nerves are unstrung, or you would not utter such words as those. Have you forgotten your husband — your mother? Above all, dear Laura, have you forgotten that it is your duty to await His will who knows best what is good for you? Do not think for a moment that I do not sincerely sympathise with you in your sorrow; but remember how much more poignant will be that of his poor sister, startled out of her dream of happiness by the melancholy tidings which will so soon reach her. Besides, you must trust, as we all

do, that youth and a good constitution will enable Mr. Marston to rally, even desperate as his case appears in our eyes. Try to rest, and I will ascertain how he is progressing."

As Jessie rose from her seat the door was gently opened, and the Earl softly entered the room. Slight as was the noise, however, it was instantly heard by his wife, who started into a sitting posture, and with extended arms and parted lips sobbed out the question she had not power to utter.

"Be composed, my dear one;" said Lord Ravenswood, tenderly pressing her to his heart; "our precious Ferdinand still lives. He has undergone a very painful operation, but the ball was skilfully extracted, and although a certain amount of fever necessarily supervened, he is so calm and courageous that we must hope for the best."

"*Can* he live?" gasped Laura.

"I am thankful to say that Mr. Armstrong considers it not only possible, but even probable, my love, should the present favourable symptoms continue; so you must not suffer your feelings to overcome you so painfully. I knew your heart would be wrung both for poor Enna and myself, but for her sake we

must endeavour not to yield to our own sorrow."

"Have you discovered the cause of this fearful event?" inquired Miss Armitage.

"Not yet;" replied the Earl; "Marston is, of course, unable to converse; and no one else appears to know anything beyond the fact of his having been found wounded shortly after the report of a shot had been heard."

"Surely;" whispered Laura in a trembling voice, as a dreadful suspicion grew upon her,—
"surely there can be no reason to believe—to fear—to suspect—that it was his own hand which ——"

"None, my darling, none. In the first place, no weapon was found near him; and, in the next, the surgeon declares it to be impossible, from the direction of the ball, that the wound should have been self-inflicted."

The young Countess heaved a long sigh of relief. *She* was not then morally his murderess; and now at last she could weep; not, however, those gushing and easily-shed tears which bring instant comfort with them; as though the deeply-seated grief of the heart, like an embedded seed, needed only, after a

long drought, a refreshing shower to emancipate it from its bondage, but those large, slow-falling, and icy drops that linger on the cheek, and exhaust the sick spirit; the heart-rain which is independent of all physical effort, noiseless, passionless, and painless.

The arrival of the family physician caused Lord Ravenswood to be summoned from the chamber of his wife; who, as he closed the door behind him, fell back upon her pillows, and buried her face in her hands. She was self-convicted of hypocrisy and deceit; how could she—how dared she—suffer her husband to believe, even for a moment, that it was for his grief and that of Enna that she sorrowed? And to whom was she thus playing the hypocrite and the deceiver? To one to whom she had voluntarily given herself, and from whom she had experienced nothing but affection and indulgence. But even this feeling of remorse faded before the agonising anxiety which she experienced regarding Marston; it seemed to her that on his life hung her own; that should he, despite the faint hope held out, sink under his sufferings, she must sink with him, for that existence without him would be impossible; and, crushed as she was,

she almost longed to lie down and die, so that they might sleep together the sleep from which none awaken to renewed suffering in this world. Now, indeed, she became conscious of the full extent of that love which was the very principle of her existence; that love to which she had involuntarily, and almost unknowingly, clung even after it had become a sin; and had she been alone, she would have cried out aloud in her anguish, and bemoaned her crime; but this solace was denied to her. Jessie, the pure and loving Jessie, watched beside her bed; and she could not pollute the ears and heart of her girlhood's friend by the outpourings of an unhallowed affection. The restraint was wholesome for her, as it calmed her agitation, and taught her to look into the depths of her struggling soul. In such moments it is well for us that we are forced back upon ourselves, for too ready a relief from our self-upbraidings would teach us to disregard them too lightly. The burden that we cast off by a slight effort never appears to us of the same weight as that which clings and trammels us before we can divest ourselves of its pressure, although both may be equally galling.

And so Laura devoured her tears and her struggles in silence, asking no sympathy, seeking no confidence, feeling that she was without the pale of pity or pardon from her own sex, and utterly self-condemned.

CHAPTER X.

A SICK-ROOM.

A WEEK had gone by, and still Marston lived ; but hope was rapidly dying out in the hearts of those by whom he was so tenderly beloved. One alone of his medical attendants still endeavoured to persuade himself that the fever might yet be overcome ; but even he spoke doubtingly, fearing to inflict upon the mourners a double disappointment.

The sick-room was carefully darkened. One solitary taper burned dimly in an alabaster vase. The curtains of the bed were looped back, and not a sound was heard, save now and then a dull, smothered sob, or the wild ravings of the unconscious sufferer. Three persons watched beside him — two young and lovely women, and a man bowed more by grief than years ; need we say that they were Enna, the Countess, and the Earl ?

Strange, that even when his mind had wandered into that mysterious world of shadows, where all human volition ceases, and the spirit seems to have emancipated itself from the trammels of the flesh, the name of Laura never once escaped the lips of Ferdinand. Like some cherished treasure, too costly and precious to be exposed to the gaze of others, his secret remained locked up in his own breast. He talked of Enna—of the Earl—of people and places about whom and which they knew nothing; and occasionally he referred to some fearful mystery by which his life had been blighted, and piteously asked why he should be so fearfully punished for another's sin. Vainly, however, did his anxious watchers endeavour to find some clue to his meaning; and they were consequently induced to believe that it was the mere baseless phantasm of fever.

The grief of the Earl was deep and wordless. It was evident that he dared not trust himself to express the extent of his sorrow. A brief inquiry addressed to the physicians, was all he hazarded; nor did he even make the faintest attempt to console his fellow-mourners. The blow had been too heavy,

and he was crushed beneath its weight. Constitutionally undemonstrative, his feelings preyed upon him inwardly; and since his marriage he had been so ill at ease with himself, that he had unconsciously yielded to a mental morbidity which rendered him unable to combat any strong emotion. The short week that had elapsed since Marston's accident had done the work of years upon him. The early hopes held out were almost extinguished. The son of his adoption, and the chosen friend of his heart, was sinking into the grave before his eyes; and he was powerless to save him. The young, fresh spirit was already quenched. The strong and manly form wrung with agony. The noble and fearless brow dank with the dews of death; and about this appalling ruin of what had so lately been one of Nature's master-pieces, clung an enigma which it appeared impossible to solve. Turn which way he would, he could find no consolation, no comfort. At intervals, a large ice-cold tear stole along his cheek, or a deep sigh heaved his breast; but he gave no other sign of the anguish by which he was bowed down.

Happy was it for both Mrs. Carlyon and

Laura that the relief of tears was not denied to them, or they must have sunk under their trial. It is the blessed privilege of their sex to ease the over-burdened heart by weeping; and as they sat, clasped in each other's arms, with their eyes fixed upon the object of their common care and anxiety, it would have been difficult for a casual observer to decide which of the two sorrowed the most deeply. Greatly, however, did the nature and extent of their grief differ. Enna mourned with all the intensity of sisterly affection, but no pang of self-reproach embittered her spirit; and even as she shuddered to reflect upon the probable termination of her painful suspense, she found solace in the consolation and tenderness of her husband, to whom she could talk of all the high and noble qualities of her brother, and speculate upon the dark cause of his present suffering. Far otherwise was it with Lady Ravenswood. Her anguish was less tranquil and more poignant; and there was no ear into which *she* dared to pour out her feelings. All was chaos about her; black, unfathomable darkness, which seemed to mock her misery; while an upbraiding voice, which would not be silenced, tortured

her with its accusing pertinacity. Should Ferdinand be indeed taken away, what remained to her in this life? In him she would lose all; while, should she survive, her existence must still be one of hopelessness and unacknowledged, but not the less, conscious guilt. There was no comfort for her in either alternative. She must still remain a living falsehood to all around her, for all alike were deceived. Still standing on the threshold of life, the gloomy portals of an undying despair were already open before her; and her agony became at times so fearful and so demonstrative that the Earl was compelled to banish her to her own room; while, utterly unconscious of the hidden cause of her anguish, he only loved her the better for her sympathy in their common suffering.

All the guests who had so lately made merry within the ancient Castle, which was now invested with a tomb-like silence, had taken their departure; and at the instigation of Mr. Carlyon, and indeed at their own suggestion, all the medical attendants save Mr. Armstrong, who still persisted in the belief that the case of Marston was not yet utterly hopeless, had taken leave in their turn; and

many more long, gloomy days went by, without any perceptible change in the state of the invalid. Although there was no sign of amendment, it was equally evident that he was no worse, or the struggle must have been over. This stationary condition of things consequently confirmed the able practitioner in his opinion, and encouraged him to persevere. He had become, if we may use the expression without irreverence, the visible providence of the sorrowing family; and as he hourly bent over his patient, his every movement, and every expression of his countenance were watched with panting and breathless earnestness. The clasped hands and eager eyes of the watchers seemed almost to ask of him the life which they felt that he alone, humanly speaking, had power to save; but his looks betrayed nothing beyond the natural anxiety of a conscientious man, fully assured that, if it were indeed the Divine will to spare the sufferer, he should be enabled, unassisted by any other individual of the faculty, to restore him to his friends.

Calm, zealous, and self-relying, there was neither presumption nor irresolution in his treatment of the patient. A conviction that

he was professionally equal to the emergency invested his bearing with a quiet authority, that unconsciously soothed and strengthened those about him ; and so fully had they learnt to rely on his judgment, that when, at the expiration of a fortnight, he turned away from the sick-bed and extended his hand to the Earl, while a faint but satisfied smile hovered on his lips, every individual of the little party instinctively felt that there was hope at last.

Lord Ravenswood bowed his head upon his breast, and faltered out a low-breathed ejaculation of thanksgiving ; while Laura and Enna sank upon their knees, and sobbed out a gratitude too great for words.

“ You have saved him ! ” at length gasped out the Earl, as he grasped the proffered hand ; “ can you—will you, give us the assurance that he is saved ? ”

“ I trust that I may do so confidently ; ” was the composed reply. “ I have now satisfied myself that my patient still retains sufficient strength to support the treatment which I have throughout his illness considered imperatively essential to his recovery, but which I have hitherto hesitated to risk.”

“ But are you satisfied that even now —— ”

“ Perfectly, my lord. I am not about to try any experiment, but simply to avail myself of a remedy which I have already tested, and in which I have firm faith. It is my duty, moreover, to assure you, and this I do most solemnly, that I know of no other means of restoring Mr. Marston. Suffer me, therefore to act as I consider to be most expedient, and confide in my long experience. This fever *must* be subdued; and there is but one method left to us by which to overcome it. I must have recourse to the lancet.”

“ More blood ! ” exclaimed Enna, springing to her feet ; “ oh, for pity’s sake, for the sake of all who love you, let there be no more blood ! ”

“ Young lady ; ” was the stern rejoinder ; “ have I not endeavoured to merit the confidence with which I have been honoured by your brother’s family ? Have faith in me still. Did I not consider the operation unavoidable,”—and as he spoke, he drew out his lancet-case,—“ I should not have ventured upon it ; but I am now satisfied that it is my duty to perform it. Do me the favour, therefore, to allow me to ring the bell for such

assistance as may be necessary, as any further loss of time may prove injurious to a patient in whom I confess myself deeply interested."

In an instant the hand of Lord Ravenswood was on the bell; while his wife, pale as a ghost, and trembling in every limb, sank back, half-swooning, upon a sofa.

"I think, my lord;" said Mr. Armstrong gravely; "that the ladies would do well to retire, as they can lend us no aid, and are in too great a state of excitement even to witness so trifling an operation as I am about to perform; nor have I a doubt that I shall soon be in a position to assure them that all will go well with Mr. Marston."

"Come, Laura;" whispered Mrs. Carlyon, resolutely suppressing her own emotion in order to soothe that of her friend; "let us go—and hope—and pray."

The young Countess rose mechanically; and, with the arm of Enna about her waist, tottered in silence from the room, without even trusting herself with a last glance at the pale, inanimate sufferer.

CHAPTER XI.

A BRIDE-ELECT.

WHAT a blessed conviction it is, when we ourselves are in torturing suspense, or in heavy affliction, that the cloud which has gathered upon our own horizon does not darken that of all our fellow-creatures; and that while we are walking in the "thickness of darkness," the paths of others are bright with sunshine and gladdened by hope. It ought, also, to be a source of consolation to us under such circumstances (although it occasionally fails to prove such), that those whom we have been accustomed to regard as our "most familiar friends," do not permit our sufferings or our struggles to interfere with their peculiar plans, pleasures, or prospects. They are very sorry, of course, that our sea of life has overwhelmed us by its billows while they are sailing tranquilly upon its surface; but they

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are necessarily not responsible for the storm by which we have been overtaken, and are merely anxious to secure their own tranquil haven.

Such was only partially, however, we are bound to admit, the position of the inhabitants of Ravenswood Castle; but while the tender-hearted Jessie Armitage and her now-affianced suitor Innes Carlyon, obeyed the suggestion of Lady Willoughby with reluctance and unconcealed regret, the remainder of the so lately joyous party took their departure with a satisfaction which they scarcely cared to disguise; and to few among them did the change of scene and feeling afford more satisfaction than to Lady Willoughby herself. It was pleasant to do the honours of Lord Ravenswood's stately home, but it was far otherwise to risk attendance on the dying, and to grieve over the dead; and it was, consequently, with an elastic step, and an expression of self-gratulation which she could not altogether suppress, that she stepped into her carriage, followed by Sir Marmaduke and her niece, after a brief leave-taking of the afflicted family, to pay her promised visit to Mrs. Gore Cunningham.

The Baronet was, however, much less philosophical than his wife; she looked only to her personal comfort, and satisfied herself with effects without speculating upon causes. If, as she sapiently argued, rational people were to adopt the troubles of those about them, what would life be worth? The worthy lady was, in fact, a disciple of that most selfish and worldly of all epigrammatists, (excepting, perhaps, Montesquieu), the late Prince Metternich, who declared that the greatest weakness of which a human being could be guilty was that of forming so sincere an affection for another as to compel himself to sympathise in his sorrows: in which case, when he had no cares of his own, he must be fretting over those of his friend, whom he thus converted into his worst enemy.

There was no danger of Lady Willoughby risking a confirmation of his creed. To tell the truth, she felt herself aggrieved. She could have passed another month very pleasantly at the Castle; and of that month (desirable as it was on many accounts), she had been defrauded; and fortunate was it for her travelling companions that her projected sojourn at the Moat House acted, in some

degree, as an escape-valve to her disappointment and ill-humour, which, however, were far from being entirely subdued.

"And you too, Dora;" she said sharply, as the carriage passed the lodge of the park and emerged into the highroad; "you have played your cards like a silly girl of sixteen. Had you possessed a single grain of common sense, you might, with your opportunities, have secured that stupid Saville Thornton. The man is a very incarnation of idleness and egotism; and by making yourself useful and essential to him, the game was in your own hands. As matters stand, however, I despair of your ever doing justice to the anxiety of your friends. You will live and die Miss Cleveland; and were it not that Mrs. Gore Cunningham expressly included you in her invitation, I should at once have requested Sir Marmaduke to sanction your return home, and to replace you by one of your younger sisters when we are again established in town."

"I think, my dear;" said the Baronet quietly; "that you are unnecessarily severe upon Dora. It struck me that she took a vast deal of trouble with Mr. Thornton;

trouble which appeared to me to be all thrown away, for I considered him a confirmed old bachelor."

"He begins to want a nurse," grumbled Lady Willoughby.

"And he shall have one, aunt;" was the spirited rejoinder of the bride-elect, who, secure in her prospect of approaching independence, did not as usual shrink from asserting herself. "Mr. Thornton has proposed to me, and I have accepted him. It was my intention to have informed you of the fact two days ago, as he requested me to do; but you have been so constantly closeted with your maid, that this is the first opportunity I have had of doing so. My uncle was, however, aware of the circumstance, and assured me of his consent."

"Of course, of course!" said her aunt; "and you have mine also. So you will not have waited all these years in vain, but will be the Hon. Mrs. Saville Thornton at last. Well, I am really quite pleased to hear it! and I have no doubt that he will make you an excellent husband. How astonished your sisters will be! You shall be married from our house, my dear; and I will provide your

wedding-breakfast. It will be more convenient for Mr. Thornton, and more desirable for yourself. A much more suitable match, after all, than that of *my* niece with Lord Ravenswood, who is old enough to be her father; but then, to be sure, he is a peer of the realm, which makes all the difference."

"Mr. Thornton's father is also a peer of the realm;" said the younger lady complacently; "and who can decide but that some day he may succeed him?"

"*I* can!" replied Lady Willoughby, with a civil sneer. "Saville Thornton has three elder brothers, and is turned fifty years of age, so that his chance is about as poor an one as that of a prize in a German estate-lottery, both being Spanish castles built on a foundation of sand. However, you have done very well; very well, indeed, and may fairly be satisfied. I suppose that I am at liberty to mention your engagement to Mrs. Gore Cunningham?"

"Most undoubtedly;" acquiesced Miss Cleveland; "there can be no reason to conceal it. Indeed, it appears to me that it will only be right and honourable to do so, in

order that she may not, on any occasion, consider me in the way of ——”

“Of her daughters, do you mean?” inquired Lady Willoughby, with a yawn. “Do not alarm yourself, my dear! In the first place, Miss Gore Cunningham is the *belle* of the county; and, in the next, you must, in any case, throw the weight of twenty years off your head before you can have a chance of competing with a girl of sixteen!”

“My reason for agreeing with you that our hostess should be apprised of the fact;” interposed the peace-loving Baronet, who detected the angry flush which rose to the cheek of his niece, and the bitter reply that trembled on her lips; “is, at all events, worthy of consideration. Mrs. Cunningham is a good-natured person, who will, if I do not mistake, feel a pleasure in making Thornton her guest when she learns the state of affairs; while at present she could find no pretext for inviting him as a mere casual acquaintance. This, it strikes me, is the rational view of the case; and I confess that I should like Dora to see a little more of him before she becomes his wife.”

“Oh, Mr. Saville Thornton is always the

same;" said Lady Willoughby. "A shade more or less gouty, and, consequently, a shade more or less cross: but, as your niece has made up her mind to become a domestic version of Florence Nightingale, she will only have the wider scope for her talent when her temper is the most tried. I make these remarks, however, entirely from regard for her; and do not hesitate to say at the same time, that had I a daughter of her age, dependent upon Arthur, I should not for a moment seek to dissuade her from a marriage which is really, when all the circumstances are taken into consideration, a highly eligible one; as it will not only give her a definite position in society, but also render her independent of her own family."

Lady Willoughby's son had failed in his matrimonial speculation, while Sir Marmaduke's niece had succeeded in hers; and glad as she was to know that the mature bride-elect was so satisfactorily disposed of, and would no longer be upon her hands, the restless-minded and self-centred woman could not help feeling that she was in some way injured by the circumstance.

That night, when she had taken possession

of the pretty little apartment which had been allotted to her, Miss Cleveland, having communicated to her uncle and aunt the brilliant prospect which had opened upon her, resolved to be equally confidential towards her four less fortunate sisters ; and having exchanged her dinner-dress for a silk wrapper, the gift of Sir Marmaduke on the occasion of their visit to Ravenswood Castle, she seated herself at a writing-table, and prepared to impart to *them* also the agreeable intelligence.

The tone in which she should do so, however, required some consideration. It has already been hinted that the Miss Clevelands did not exactly cling together like the Pleiades ; and, consequently, it was no outpouring of a sisterly heart which she was about to intrust to paper. Her first impulse was to be serenely dignified as regarded herself, and condescendingly sympathising and regretful with respect to them, and she had some trouble to overcome it ; but she had a somewhat unpleasant recollection of their mutual talent for sarcasm and ridicule ; and it occurred to her that as she was not yet the Honourable Mrs. Saville Thornton, and that some awkward mischance *might* even now prevent her ever becoming so,

and compel her to return to her home plain Dorothea Cleveland, she ultimately considered it more judicious to dip her pen in honey than in gall. She sat for a while with the fair page spread out before her, her elbow on the table, and her hand buried in her hair; and then, rousing herself to action, she commenced her task.

CHAPTER XII.

A LOVE-SCENE.

“MY DEAR SISTERS,

“I address you collectively, for you are all equally dear to me. You have, perhaps, considered me remiss in not writing sooner, but it has been totally out of my power to do so. No one, living in the sweet retirement which you are now enjoying, can form more than a very imperfect idea of the turmoils of a London existence; and when *other* events occur to increase the excitement, it becomes totally impossible to do more than satisfy the passing demands on one’s time and attention. This, however, is tenfold the case in a great country-house, where you owe yourself to the assembled guests; and when you calmly consider these facts, you will not wonder at my silence. I told you in my last that we were about to leave town for Ravenswood Castle,

which we accordingly did, and with which I was greatly delighted. It is a magnificent old place, and as grand and stately as its owner. Miss Greville's marriage was a splendid affair, and I like her very much. Her brother is a great favourite of the Earl's, but too haughty and reserved for my taste. There was a great gathering of the county families, who were all, as a natural consequence, at the feet of 'my lord;' and this is as it should be, as he is not only a peer of the realm, but also a member of the Royal Household; and that, after all, the true dignity of England is dependent on her aristocracy. You will, I dare say, be astonished to find that I admit this, as such was not formerly my opinion; but, like many others who had not had a proper opportunity of judging for themselves, I find that I was mistaken on the subject when I suffered myself to be influenced by the sentiments of a parcel of ignorant and prejudiced country squires—— By the bye, talking of them, what are you, Rebecca, making of Mr. Grandison? You know that when I left home you were convinced that he was about to propose; so that I hope when I next hear from you, all will be settled,

“ But to return to the party at the Castle. It was, in every respect, a brilliant one ; and I shall be greatly mistaken if Mr. Carlyon’s brother does not soon follow his example, for he evidently fell violently in love with a very pretty girl, a Miss Armitage, an old friend of Lady Ravenswood. As to Mr. Marston, I am inclined to believe that he had lost his heart (such as it is) to the daughter of our present hostess ; but that speculation is at an end, as he has fought a duel, or had an accident, or something of the kind, and is now on his death-bed, if he is not already dead, as he was not expected to live many hours when we left Ravenswood, which we did in a great hurry, Lady Willoughby being too nervous to run the risk of anything happening before she got away. It was, as she justly remarked, very provoking, as we were in the full tide of our gaieties, all of which were of course at an end when the event took place ; but, fortunately, Mrs. Gore Cunningham, with whom we are now on a visit, had previously invited my uncle, and aunt, and myself, to her charming place whenever we left the Castle ; and here we accordingly came to my infinite relief, as neither the Earl nor the Countess were visible

after the body of Mr. Marston was brought home.

“ So much for my news ; and now I have something to tell you of myself. Among the Castle guests was a certain Honourable Saville Thornton, a relative of his lordship, a man of high birth and breeding ; in short, the son of a peer of the realm ; who, from the first day we met, devoted himself almost entirely to my unworthy self ; and, after having carefully studied my tastes and disposition, finished by offering me his hand. You will all, I know, be delighted at this, when I assure you that he is, in *every respect*, all I could desire him to be ; and he is so very anxious that our marriage should take place *without delay*, that I have been compelled to consent to its celebration as soon as possible after our return to town. As it will, however, be out of the question for me to become the wife of a man of his rank without a certain degree of splendour, my preparations will, as a matter of course, defer it for a few weeks ; although these, I have reason to know, will be hastened and expedited by the kindness and liberality of Sir Marmaduke and Lady Willoughby, the latter of whom has behaved to me on this

trying occasion with all the anxious tenderness of a mother.

“I am happy to tell you that I am to be married from their house, so that Adolphus will be spared much trouble and expense, and that whatever portion he intends to give me will be available for other purposes. I cannot say how rejoiced I am that I completed my rug and chair-covers before I left home, as they will answer admirably for my morning-room; and as Mr. Thornton dotes on dogs he will be sure to admire them. I wish that Jane would pack them, as they will require great care, and she is a capital packer when she likes.

“My dear Saville will, I expect, join us here in a few days, as Mrs. Gore Cunningham has kindly proposed sending to-morrow to beg him to do so, and I know that he detests London in the summer months. All men of fashion are alike in that respect.

“I have now written you a very long letter, and the time-piece on my dressing-table has just struck twelve o’clock, so that I am getting tired. Let me hear from you soon to say that you have received my letter; and trusting that I may set poor giddy Eva (should we ever again meet) an example of the

proper dignity of married life—an example which, unhappily, she greatly needs—

“I remain,

“Your affectionate Sister,

“DOROTHEA CLEVELAND.”

The fair betrothed was, however, despite her country education and breeding, too thoroughly a woman of the world to seek her bed before she had also initiated her brother into her secret. It was all very well and very pleasant, as she smilingly convinced herself, to aggravate and mortify her sisters—for that they would be both mortified and aggravated she did not for an instant doubt; but it was absolutely essential that she should at once ascertain what she had to expect from the generosity—she, and perhaps with some reason, called it the justice—of Adolphus; and accordingly she at once set to work, told her tale as briefly as she could, and bravely asked the question. She reminded him that this was the last sacrifice he would be called upon to make for her; and that while her sisters would probably remain his pensioners for life, she should make no further demand upon him. Then she touched upon the

honour of their family, which would be irretrievably disgraced should she become the wife of one of Lord's Ravenswood's relatives without a proper provision; and the mortification which such a circumstance would entail upon Sir Marmaduke and Lady Willoughby, who had already made up their minds to invite her youngest sister to town immediately after her own marriage, and probably even before it.

Miss Dorothea Cleveland was shrewd and long-headed, and thoroughly understood the nature of her brother. He was proud, jealous of censure, and, above all, devotedly attached to his wife. On all these, his weak points, she had skilfully assailed him. She knew that his vanity would be flattered by her marriage with the son and cousin of two peers; that his uncle considered him bound in honour to provide handsomely for his sisters, and would resent his failure in so doing, probably to an extent which might induce him to decline all further communication with the Cleveland family; and that, for Eva's sake, he would make any reasonable sacrifice which might tend to the absence from his home of the exacting and querulous

domestic tyrants by whom her young life was hourly embittered.

She was right; and the reward of her moral courage, and cunning skill in reading character, was the promise of a portion of five thousand pounds.

Love-scenes are proverbially wearisome to all save the parties concerned; and yet an exception to this rule occasionally occurs, which renders it imperative upon a faithful chronicler of events to inflict it upon his readers; and such we consider that to be which so suddenly decided the fate of Miss Dorothea Cleveland. Some idea of the lady's broad reading of truth may be gathered from the statement contained in her letter to her sisters regarding the maternal tenderness of Lady Willoughby; and the assurance which she volunteered that Mr. Saville Thornton was, in every respect, all she could desire; the simple fact being, that throughout the remainder of her life she never forgave her uncle's wife the sarcasms with which she had coupled her congratulations on her projected marriage; while as regarded the man whom she had pledged herself to "love, honour, and obey," she had never deluded herself into

the belief that he was anything save a mere sensual, selfish egotist, of whom she must become either the tyrant or the slave.

Why, then, it may be asked, should a woman of forty-five, whose romance must have years ago been extinguished by the icy flood of the world's realities; possessed, moreover, of a comfortable home, free from all personal responsibilities, and not compelled to risk her future welfare to the keeping of a comparative stranger, have rushed headlong, and forewarned into a net, from which, flutter as she might when once enmeshed, she never would again free herself? The answer is a simple one. If fore-warned, the niece of Sir Marmaduke felt that she was also fore-armed; and that, possessing a strength of will superior to that of the Honourable Saville, she should find it easy to enforce it, either by a *coup de main* by which he should be crushed at once, or by a patient tact that must induce him to believe that while he was in reality her puppet, he was himself pulling the strings by which he was made to move. Once his wife, she would soon be able to decide as to which of the two was the most desirable method of accomplishing her purpose: for yielding and

self-abnegating as she had shown herself to be during their brief acquaintance, she was by no means inclined to carry so ungenial a system into her married life.

At first she might have much to contend against, but for this she was quite prepared; for had she not throughout her whole existence had to fight her way, inch by inch, against four sisters, all as obstinate and as self-willed as herself? Crimination and re-crimination had been to her a species of daily bread; and her nerves had gradually indurated beneath the process, until they were as perfectly ossified as her heart. For many years, as we have already stated, she had abandoned all hope of matrimony; but she no sooner cast her eyes upon Mr. Thornton, and satisfied herself that he was to be won through his idleness and egotism, than she became a perfect man-trap, from which there was no escape for an individual of his peculiar temperament.

Thus much premised, we will accompany her to the lawn, where her antiquated acquaintance was awaiting her on the morning preceding that on which they mutually departed from Ravenswood Castle.

"This is a horrid bore, Miss Cleveland!" was his first courteous greeting as she reached his side; "in fact, I may go so far as to say that it is an intolerable nuisance. What right has any man, lord or commoner, to invite you to his house, and then to inflict on you such inconvenience as I shall have to undergo from so sudden a change of residence? As a matter of course we shall all have to decamp at once, and leave the Castle to the nurses and doctors, for nothing can go right with a dying man under the roof. The cooks will be employed in preparing linseed poultices and barley-water; and it is worse than idle to suppose that, under such circumstances, a decent dinner can be put upon the table."

"I fear, indeed, that there is little chance of comfort for those who remain;" sighed Dora softly; "and I therefore rejoice to know, Mr. Thornton, that you at least are a free agent, and are not compelled to subject yourself to such a trial of your patience, and, it may even be, such a risk to your health."

"Compelled! No, indeed, I should think not! Who is to compel *me*?" was the ruffled rejoinder; "nobody has ever been able to compel me to do anything that did not please

me since I was a boy, and rely on it that no one ever will."

"I have a great respect for strength of purpose;" said his companion meekly; "it always evidences a superior mind."

"Of course it does;" responded the gentleman, possessing himself of her neatly gloved hand; "and one which it equally requires a superior mind to appreciate. I have already discovered that *yours is* a superior mind, Miss Cleveland, or I should not have bestowed so much of my time and attention on you."

"His time is so valuable, and his attentions are so delicate!" murmured the lady to herself, but she did not withdraw her hand—he had never held it so long before: indeed, Mr. Thornton was one of those cordial individuals who content themselves by extending a couple of fingers to a friend, and then suddenly withdrawing them as though they had come into contact with red-hot iron.

What a pity that these two congenial spirits were to part so soon!

"I'll tell you what;" pursued the Honourable Saville, moving in the direction of the southern shrubbery; "for I am a candid man, and never disguise my feelings; had it not

been for you I should have found this visit deucedly stupid from the first. There has been nothing like peace or tranquillity in the house. One might as well have taken up one's quarters in a caravansary; but you and the chess-board together reconciled me in a great degree to the eternal fume and fidget going on about me."

"I am sincerely glad, I am sure, my dear sir, to find that my society has been pleasant or useful to you in any way;" was the modest reply; "it is more than I ever ventured to anticipate."

"In that case you did yourself injustice, Miss Cleveland;" said her companion with dignified condescension; "though you must, and of course *will*, excuse me if I admit that it would have been more decidedly both the one and the other, had you fortunately been a more skilful player than you are. However, it is a noble game, full of science, and requiring an amount of judgment which one has perhaps no right to look for in a woman."

"And, moreover, Mr. Thornton, you should remember that it exacts an amount of nerve to play against you which your adversary may not always possess."

"A very sensible remark, Miss Cleveland, and very gracefully put. Feeling as you do, you are sure to improve, and may even end by one day understanding the game."

"I am sure I hope so," smiled the lady, as she recollected how often she had thrown the game into his hands in order to ingratiate herself with him; and how immeasurably she was, in this her solitary accomplishment, superior to him in science; "and no doubt that day would have arrived much more speedily had I not been so unexpectedly deprived of your invaluable tuition; however, all I can now do is to endeavour not to forget the precious instructions for which I am indebted to you."

"Miss Cleveland, I feel bound to acknowledge that you rise hourly in my estimation. I like your plastic and womanly spirit; it is the best ornament of your sex, for it endears you to ours. I only wish that a month or two more had elapsed, as then we should have had a chance of meeting shortly again in town; but of course London is out of the question at present under any circumstances."

"I find that Sir Marmaduke and Lady Willoughby have no immediate intention of

returning to town ;” said their niece ; “ but that, on the contrary, we go to-morrow to the Moat House on a visit to Mrs. Gore Cunningham.”

“ Ha, indeed ! Capital management that of Lady Willoughby. Nothing could be better. I am only sorry that I am not sufficiently well acquainted with the lady to join your party. You could have taken a few more lessons in chess in that case—eh, Miss Cleveland ?”

“ That would have been delightful, indeed, sir ; but, alas ! ——”

“ Well, what I *am* to do with myself for the next few weeks, I cannot conceive ;” pursued her companion. “ I wish I could strike out something novel that would not give me much trouble ; but it’s such a bore to go about hunting for excitement that it never repays one for one’s labour. By the bye, Miss Cleveland, how do you amuse yourself when you are at home ?”

“ I, Mr. Thornton ? Oh, I always find enough to occupy me ; for when I have nothing of personal interest to attend to, my sisters all require a thousand little attentions which it is of course my duty to pay them. With four younger sisters, all more or less dependent on

my care and sympathy, I seldom find time hang heavy upon my hands. I am the family nurse, and that alone is a serious responsibility."

"The family nurse! then you are not afraid of a sick-room, eh?"

"Afraid!" echoed the lady, opening her pale blue eyes with an expression of well-acted astonishment, which was intended to infer that she really considered a sick-room to be one of the pleasantest places in the world. "What true woman ever shrinks from the sight of suffering when she believes that she can help to alleviate it? Wordsworth did us more justice than you appear inclined to do, Mr. Thornton."

"No, by Jove! I have sometimes thought that there might perhaps be here and there one of your sex who could prefer another's comfort to her own; but as I never before chanced to stumble upon such a person, I have felt inclined to believe that, after all, she was only a myth. Have you ever chanced to nurse your worthy uncle in a fit of the gout, my dear Miss Cleveland?"

"Surely you must be aware that he is occasionally a martyr to that painful disease,

and that I have now been residing for many weeks under his roof, with no better opportunity of showing my gratitude for his great kindness than ——”

“True, true; the thing is self-evident; and you could make him no better return than by nursing him carefully through his attacks. You are right, quite right; and you have done well to profit by the privilege of your sex. You are one of the daughters of Geoffry Cleveland of Cleveland Place, if I do not mistake.”

“I am his eldest daughter, Mr. Thornton.”

“Just so; I thought I had been led to understand as much. A good old family—a very good old family; thoroughly respectable both from its antiquity and its position in the county.”

“We rather pride ourselves upon our family, I confess,” was the reply.

“Of course you do,—of course you do; and no doubt your father was careful to provide well for you all at his decease?”

“The truth is, my dear sir;” said the lady, with a sublime composure which evinced her perfect confidence as to the nature of her financial prospects: “that his children were

so thoroughly united both in heart and interest, that they quite agreed with him in thinking that the family property would prove more ultimately productive by being suffered to remain as an undisturbed whole so long as we all continued to reside together, than by being divided and subdivided at his death. We *have*, as I need scarcely tell you, never experienced a wish to separate; not even the marriage of my brother having caused any change in our domestic arrangements."

"But in the event of your own marriage, or that of one of your sisters?"

"Oh, then, of course;" eagerly replied his companion; "the will of my father will be carried out, and a proper provision be made for the bride, necessarily dependent in amount on the rank and social position of the person to whom she may unite herself."

There was a momentary silence. The heart of the fair Dora beat high, and her suspense was almost suffocating; either Mr. Thornton was about to make her an offer of his hand, or his cool impertinence exceeded even what she could have anticipated from *him*.

"Miss Cleveland—Dora"—he said at last; "you have conquered; and you may

believe me when I say that your conquest is by no means one to be despised, for you have convinced me—me, Saville Thornton—a man who had hitherto considered a wife only in the light of an expensive and useless appendage, that I may have formed an erroneous judgment. We are neither of us young enough, or, I trust, romantic enough, to contemplate a series of love-scenes, which we can well afford to leave to the herd of silly boys and girls who have no better occupation for their time. Be frank, therefore, and tell me if I am deceived in believing that you will have no objection to become my wife.”

“Really, Mr. Thornton ——” commenced the lady.

“Pshaw!” exclaimed the man of facts and calculation; “I have a decided dislike to subterfuge and affectation of every kind. I have asked a plain and intelligible question, and I wait for a reply.”

Miss Cleveland was afraid to trust herself with words, lest the mingled feelings of indignation and triumph by which she was assailed should choke her outright; but she did not fail to look up into the face of her antiquated suitor with a smile, which must have perfectly

satisfied him as to his success, even had he for a moment doubted it.

And this had been the wooing,—this the delicate consideration and respect which she had experienced from the man who she had deliberately assured her sisters was in every respect all she could desire! She had, however, carried her point; she was to be the Hon. Mrs. Saville Thornton; henceforth and for ever secure from the tauntings and ridicule of those whom she had now distanced in the race which they had all run so eagerly for a longer time than she cared to remember; nor was it until she turned away to re-enter the Castle that she suffered the angry flush of offended pride, and the bitter sneer of a contempt more threatening still, to suffuse her cheek, and play about her convulsed and quivering lips.

CHAPTER XIII.

CONVALESCENCE.

LADY RAVENSWOOD had no sooner reached her chamber than she sank upon her bed totally insensible, and it was a considerable time before the united efforts of Enna and her maid could restore her to consciousness. With a perception of surrounding objects, necessarily returned a sense of the terror which had induced her swoon ; and she was no sooner able to articulate than she implored Mrs. Carlyon to resume her station by the bedside of her brother.

“ The worst must now be over ;” she said faintly. “ Go back, I beseech you, Enna ; see him, and let me know the truth. Would that I possessed your strength of character, and could also watch beside him ; but indeed, indeed I dare not make the attempt, for the trial is greater than I can bear.”

Her wish was complied with, her maid in her turn dismissed, and Laura no sooner found herself alone than she flung herself wildly upon her knees, and strove to pray. Vain, however, was the effort: the pale and ghastly countenance of Ferdinand was before her eyes, his soulless ravings were in her ears; and she sprang up, and paced to and fro the spacious room like one in her turn bereft of reason; her hurried glances flashed over every object around her, but she saw nothing save one dreary void—the void in her own heart—the songs of summer birds came through the open windows, but she heard nothing save the cry of her own tortured spirit.

How long this moral agony had endured she knew not, when she heard steps upon the landing, and the door of her chamber was gently opened. It was Enna, pale, trembling, and scarcely able to support herself.

“Ah, he is dead!” gasped the young Countess, grasping the back of a chair which chanced to be near her.

“No, no;” faltered out her friend; “for a moment we indeed thought that all was over, and the terror of that moment overcame me as you see; but he rallied, he rallied, Laura;

and now the danger is past, and he will be restored to us."

Lady Ravenswood clasped her hands in thanksgiving, and gazed eagerly into the face of her companion.

"Mr. Armstrong has spoken not only confidently, but positively," pursued Mrs. Carlyon; "and has now assured us that our dear Ferdinand requires nothing but care and quiet to ensure his perfect recovery. No one is to enter his room except the Earl and his nurse for some days to come, so that, painful as it is, we must submit to a temporary banishment. Let us not murmur, however, but rather be grateful that the fearful blow which we anticipated has been so mercifully averted."

"She is his sister—his only one"—murmured Laura to herself; "but she does not love him as I do!"

Then, instantly conscious of her injustice, she threw herself into Enna's arms, and wept out the violence of her emotion on her bosom.

Hour after hour wore on, and the most profound stillness reigned throughout the castle. From time to time Lady Ravenswood's maid stole in to bring them tidings

of the invalid, who slept on calmly under the guardianship of the Earl and the zealous Mr. Armstrong. But at length the eyelids of Mrs. Carlyon, who was worn out with fatigue and anxiety, began to droop; and she reluctantly resolved to rest for a few hours. For several days and nights neither the one nor the other of these two delicate women had attempted to do so; and although Laura felt that sleep would be to her impossible, she threw herself upon a couch, and promised to follow the example of her friend.

Day dawned, the night-lamp waned, and still the young Countess watched and listened; watched for she knew not what, and listened she knew not wherefore. The air of the early morning chilled her, and she shivered beneath its influence; but she did not make an effort to protect herself from it. She could not yet believe that Ferdinand was spared to her—to *her*! Should she not rather have said to his sister—to his adopted father? But she thought not of them; she still saw him stretched pale and stark before her, and she could not divest herself of the belief that she had looked on death. There was a strange fascination in that belief. In the prostration

of her moral energies, she almost persuaded herself that it would have been better so ; for how could she have survived when he who was the very principle of her existence had passed away ? “ No ; ” she gasped out in the silence of her solitude ; “ one grave, one resting-place, one funeral dirge, and the struggle would have been over. But now — but now —— ” and then she buried her hands in her disordered hair, and gave free vent to the agony of her labouring spirit.

It was vain to hope for peace where there was no peace ; and thus, while the gentle and pure-hearted Enna slumbered like a wearied child, and smiled amid the tears which had gathered beneath her eyelids, Laura, devoured by unrest, alike of mind and body, passed a night of anguish such as few so young and inexperienced as herself in life have ever known.

The skilful practitioner had judged wisely. The desperate remedy which he had employed produced the desired effect ; Marston slowly recovered his senses ; and as his heavy eyes rested upon the Earl he strove to smile. At a signal from Mr. Armstrong, however, Lord Ravenswood averted his head without making

any response; and in another instant the invalid slept again; his breathing became less laboured, and a scarcely perceptible moisture broke out upon his brow; the inflammation disappeared from the neighbourhood of his wound, and the crisis was past.

The wound itself, however, was of so serious a nature that Mr. Armstrong considered it his duty to apprise the Earl that the convalescence of his patient would be both tedious and painful, lest he should be discouraged by the apparent languor and helplessness of the invalid; but Lord Ravenswood, deeply thankful that his adopted son was spared to him, only wrung the hand of the excellent man who had sustained and strengthened him throughout his bitter trial, with the assurance that he should not consider the devotion of years too great could he once more see his beloved Ferdinand restored to health and strength.

What were days, weeks, months of care, compared with the treasure which was ultimately to be their recompense? Did not the miser deem a lifetime too short to gloat over the sordid gold which he had scraped together? Did not the statesman willingly resign his home-comforts, his peace of mind,

and his independence of action, in order to secure the object of his ambition? Did not the faithful heart pass without repining through long years of suspense and trial that the loved one might be its reward at last? And could *he* murmur that so great a blessing as the recovery of the being he most valued upon earth was to be granted to him at any cost of sacrifice on his part? No; in a reverent and grateful spirit Lord Ravenswood listened and replied,—all for which he had prayed and supplicated during his night-watches beside the sick-bed was to be ultimately granted to him; and every other consideration was absorbed in this one blissful conviction.

One heart, one hope, appeared to pervade the whole household. Marston was reaping the harvest of respectful affection which, by his considerate kindness and urbanity of manner, he had unconsciously sowed. There was not a single individual beneath the roof of Lord Ravenswood who did not sympathise with his sufferings, and reverence the man whose indefatigable perseverance had preserved a life so precious to their lord. Great, therefore, was the general gratulation when,

on a fine, balmy, autumnal morning, the emaciated and helpless invalid, borne in the arms of Mr. Armstrong like an infant, was able to be laid upon a sofa in the morning-room of the Countess, where he found himself surrounded by flowers and books, all carefully prepared to greet his arrival.

Sunshades had been drawn across the windows to veil the light ; thick carpets had been spread along the galleries to deaden the sound of approaching footsteps ; and above all, and beyond all, his thin, wasted hands were clasped in those of his sister, his benefactor, and hers who was unhappily dearer to him than either.

For several days Marston could only look his gratitude, but those about him asked no more ; they could minister to his wants, and alleviate his sufferings ; and as occasionally a slight colour suffused his cheek, and a faint light kindled in his eye, their hearts overflowed with gladness. Gradually, however, his strength returned, and he was able to converse, to listen to the sweet, subdued voice of one of his anxious nurses as she read to him a few pages from one of his favourite authors, and even to take an interest in such passing events as the Earl deemed it prudent

to communicate to him. Carlyon also was added to their little party ; and thus he saw himself surrounded by all those whom he loved best on earth. Why could he not live on thus for ever, in this sweet, placid state of semi-existence which shut out all the cares and turmoil of the world, and which seemed to him in his languor and exhaustion to be a foretaste of beatitude ?

CHAPTER XIV.

A "NEW-BAKED" BARONESS.

It will be readily understood that the anxiety of Lord Ravenswood to ascertain the real cause of his ward's unhappy accident had never abated for an instant; but in compliance with the advice of Mr. Armstrong he had hitherto carefully abstained from any allusion to the subject in his presence. The absence of the ex-sergeant had deprived him of all opportunity of subjecting the veteran to the rigid cross-examination from which he had hoped and expected to elicit the truth; while from the keeper, whom he had alternately bribed and threatened, he was unable to learn anything. True to his word, the man persisted in his original declaration of ignorance. Mr. Marston lived; and the culprit was the cousin of the Countess; these two important facts sealed his lips. The

great trouble was over, as he sensibly argued in his own mind, and why should he bring a new sorrow into the family, for which there was no cure?

Now, however, when he saw Ferdinand surely, although slowly rallying, the Earl could no longer refrain from expressing his desire to become acquainted with the origin of his sufferings; but once more he was destined to disappointment. Mildly, but resolutely, the invalid declined to offer any explanation.

"That you have fought a duel, Ferdinand, I feel convinced;" said Lord Ravenswood. "It is true that no weapon was found near you, but the very nature of your wound bears evidence of the fact. All I ask is the name of your antagonist."

"My dear lord;" said Marston, struggling to force a smile; "do not poachers carry fire-arms?"

"They do; but they do not use them in broad daylight within half-a-mile of the Castle, nor under the very noses of the keepers. You are not frank with me, my dear boy."

"I am not!" replied Ferdinand; "and I entreat of you not to press for a more direct

answer. The worst effects of my folly are now over, and I am anxious to forget it."

"You do not then deny that you have been engaged in a duel?" urged the Earl, with a deep sigh.

"I neither deny nor admit anything;" said Marston; "but I ask you in my turn, my best friend, if you consider it probable that I, a perfect stranger in this neighbourhood, could so soon have made an enemy? or if I am of so quarrelsome a nature as to involve myself in a brawl without just cause?"

"I admit the justice of your reasoning, and I am thankful to be able to do so;" said Lord Ravenswood; "for you are well aware of my estimate of a duellist; and from your very boyhood it has been to me a source of sincere satisfaction that you fully shared my sentiments. My mind is now comparatively at ease; and although I could have wished that no secret should ever exist between us, I will not urge you further."

Poor Ferdinand! It appeared to him, as his adopted father confidently pressed his hand, that he was destined to live a life of perpetual deceit; and yet, how could he confess that he had been driven to the very act which the Earl so bitterly deprecated, in

defence of his wife's honour and his own? How could he tell him that this was not the first, or the most painful secret which existed between them?

True to his word Lord Ravenswood never again alluded to the subject; but the curiosity of Enna and the Countess was not so easily satisfied, and Marston found considerable difficulty in eluding their persevering inferences and suppositions.

On one occasion, when he was even more closely pressed than usual, he laughingly declared that he had, like a modern Amadis, done battle against a formidable Paladin, who had registered a vow to storm the Castle, and carry off its mistress.

"And you will readily believe that the combat was a fierce one;" he added; "when you remember that the victor himself was nearly vanquished."

"You should first have asked my pleasure upon the subject;" smiled Lady Ravenswood. "Such valorous knights are not common in these degenerate days; and a woman could scarcely do otherwise than feel an interest in one who was willing to risk his life for her fair sake."

"Ferdinand is turning poet;" said Enna;

"his pleasant fiction should be immortalised in a ballad, for the delectation of all romantic misses."

"By the bye, talking of pugnacious Paladins;" observed the Countess, abruptly turning to Marston; "the hurried departure of Arthur Willoughby has always struck me as very strange."

"Arthur Willoughby!" echoed Ferdinand. "Has he been here? How singular that no one should have mentioned the circumstance before!"

"You were not then aware of his visit, if such he really considered it?" said Laura; "and I am glad to be satisfied on that point; for, to tell you the truth, he is so wrong-headed and reckless that I feared he might in some way have given you offence, and been the author of all our anxiety."

"Do you suppose for a moment;" asked Marston; "that I would have called out a relative of *yours*, Lady Ravenswood?"

"What an extraordinary idea, my dear Laura!" exclaimed Mrs. Carlyon. "What cause of quarrel could ever exist between my brother and your cousin?"

"We are scarcely even acquaintances;"

interposed Ferdinand ; “and now, if you two ladies really wish to oblige me, you will let the matter rest. Will you promise me this ?”

“On condition that you get well as fast as possible ;” said the young Countess ; “but on no other ; although I confess that your illness has improved you in some respects, so that you have bribed us to patience.”

And as she spoke she blushed slightly.

Why was it that Marston did not venture to ask the meaning of that declaration, and of the look by which it was accompanied ? Simply because he comprehended it only too well. Since the period of his accident his physical weakness had reacted upon his moral character. He had no longer strength to sustain the affected coldness and indifference which he had assumed towards Laura ; tended by her hands, cheered by her smiles, and soothed by her tenderness, he had gradually ceased to repel her attentions, or to avoid her eye ; while words of gratitude, low-breathed, and consequently the more precious to her, were continually upon his lips. More than once he had detained in his own the small white hand that smoothed the cushions of his couch ; and there was in his whole manner a softness which

contrasted forcibly with his former cold and reserved demeanour. He was, in short, once more the Ferdinand of her heart's dream,—the idol of her first and undying love,—restored to her, as it seemed, from the gates of the grave. Nothing could be more varied, nothing more graphic, than his descriptions of the countries he had visited, and the individuals whom he had met, during his absence from England. He no longer shrank from dwelling upon his impressions or his experience ; and if occasionally a tinge of melancholy was perceptible in his recital, all the bitterness in which he had indulged when first he returned home had disappeared.

Of the little party no one was more rejoiced at this happy change of feeling in his beloved ward than the Earl, whose health, shattered by his excessive anxiety, compelled him to pass hours together in his chair ; but he was not long permitted to indulge in this luxurious inaction, as the period for Her Majesty's annual visit to Balmoral had arrived, and he received the royal command to attend her to Scotland,—a command which, for the first time, he prepared to obey with regret. Vainly, however, did his family entreat that he would

urge his invalid state as a reason for requesting permission to absent himself from his post; his respectful attachment for his royal mistress was too great for him to be induced to consent.

"Were I really ill," he said; in reply to their importunities; "I should be compelled to do so; but I have no bodily ailment, and it is very possible that the necessity for exertion may benefit me more than my recent self-indulgence."

"But suppose that it should prove otherwise?" persisted Laura, who, for some reason which she could not explain to herself, was even more anxious than her companions that the Earl should not leave the Castle.

"In that case, my nervous little wife;" replied Lord Ravenswood, with a smile of gratified affection; "I will request permission to return home, and owe my recovery to your careful nursing."

"How long is the court likely to remain at Balmoral?" asked the Countess, with a pale cheek and quivering lips.

"Nay, my love, I am not in Her Majesty's confidence; but in all probability I shall be absent a couple of months."

"A couple of months!" murmured Laura abstractedly.

"During which," continued her husband; "I shall hope that Enna and yourself, under the supervision of our excellent friend Armstrong, will effect the perfect cure of this dear boy. Remember that I must have a letter every day reporting progress, while I will promise on my side to be an exact and copious correspondent."

"*Apropos* of letters;" said the Countess, blushing in spite of herself at the consciousness of a pre-occupation which had caused her to forget all else, but at the same time with a mischievous twinkle in her eye; "I have received a long one this morning from the Baroness von Hartheim."

"And who is the Baroness von Hartheim?" was the general inquiry.

"Not *née* Heathcote, but *Veuve* Heathcote;" said Laura; "and I really do not know exactly whether to laugh or weep over my poor mother's change of name. She has, she tells me, purchased a pretty property within thirty miles of Vienna, from which she derives her title; paid the customary fine or contribution, or whatever may be the proper

term for the privilege of denationalising herself; kissed hands on attaining her new honours; and intends returning to England in three or four months, by which time she hopes to have 'set her house in order,' and rendered it fit for the reception of her friends whenever they feel inclined to pay a visit to Austria."

"Badly-invested money, I fear;" observed the Earl with a quiet smile.

"I indorse your opinion without hesitation;" replied his wife; "and I only hope that she was spared the mortification undergone by poor Miss T——, who, on a similar occasion, was greeted by old Franz with the remark; 'I am happy to accept you as a subject, madam: but it strikes me, that had I been the sister of an Irish peer I should have had no ambition to become a *neubackene* German Baroness.'"

"And a strange ornament she was to the stately court of the Hapsburghs;" followed up Lord Ravenswood, glad to seize upon any subject which could divert the thoughts of those around him, although only for a few moments, from their approaching separation: "I remember that when I was at Vienna

during the reign of the last Emperor, she was one of its lions. Nothing could be more sordid than her dress ; indeed, on several occasions, money was offered to her in the streets by travellers who believed her to be a pauper ; and yet this poor lady, not contented with the title which she had purchased, never rested until she exchanged it for a better-sounding one ; and it was as Countess T—— that she died some years ago in the country of her adoption."

"She was probably deranged——" suggested Mrs. Carlyon

"Not a whit ;" was the reply ; "she was as shrewd a little woman as I ever encountered ; and, before the marriage of Lord Beauville, she headed his table on reception-days, and presented all English ladies who were eligible to claim the privilege, to the two Empresses ; and when once one was able to forget that she was a countrywoman, it was really laughable to see her trotting about the spacious gilded saloons of the Viennese nobility in a washed-out muslin gown and cotton gloves, as consequentially as though the elegantly-attired court-ladies by whom she was elbowed were dressed in a similar style ; nay, to give you an idea of her perfect independence of action on

at this point, I may as well tell you that she once *chaperoned* a female friend of my own to a *soirée* at Prince Metternich's, when her turban, which was composed of a crimson silk-handkerchief, was decorated with a couple of feather-brushes with which she had seen the Princess some days before wafting away the dust from some costly *Sèvres* ornaments, and which she begged from her Highness for the very purpose to which she had that evening applied them."

"My *dear* lord!" exclaimed Enna deprecatingly.

"I pledge you my honour to the truth of the anecdote;" said the Earl; "and any English traveller in Vienna in the year 1840, who was admitted to the court-circle, and whom you may hereafter chance to meet, will at once corroborate my statement."

"She must have been a strong-minded woman;" observed Ferdinand; "but I doubt whether she would have been tolerated at Buckingham Palace and York House."

"She was wise enough never to try the experiment;" said Lord Ravenswood; "for, with the exception of a rare visit to Castle T——, she never left Germany."

"And that brings me back to Balmoral;"

interposed the Countess, laying her hand on that of her husband. "Surely if you were to represent to the Queen ——"

"Do not urge me further, my dear Laura;" said the Earl, gazing tenderly at the beautiful face that was bent towards him; "or you will inflict on me the regret of having been compelled to refuse a request of yours for the first time."

Beyond this declaration there was no appeal; and in eight-and-forty hours after it was made the well-packed travelling-carriage stood before the great entrance of the Castle, tearful adieux were exchanged, and Lord Ravenswood departed.

As he drove off, Laura rushed to her own room. Never before had she felt so utterly alone, so utterly helpless. She had never understood until that moment how completely she relied for support upon her husband; how she had unconsciously learnt to look up to him for counsel and protection, for sympathy and solace. And how had she repaid his generous self-abnegation and indulgence?

She bowed her head self-rebuked; she looked into her heart, and shuddered; the

spoilt child of fortune felt as though in the bitterness of the draught which touched her lip she would fain have drunk annihilation ; and then the old and holy traditions of her childhood coming back upon her, she closed her eyes, and prayed.

CHAPTER XV.

A DOMESTIC SPY.

AMONG the personal attendants of Lady Ravenswood was a French *soubrette*, whom she had, at the express desire of her mother, engaged a short time before her marriage; nor was it long ere Adèle became a general favourite with all the household, excepting only the staid Mrs. Martin, who, having been Laura's nurse, had accompanied her to her new home. To her the sprightly graces and coquettish airs of the arch little foreigner were odious; but even her lady was under the spell of Adèle, and she was consequently compelled to tolerate her companionship. Never was there a lighter hand, a quicker eye, or a more exquisite taste than those of the young Frenchwoman; while her readiness to oblige had often caused her services to be put in requisition by the fair guests who

were assembled at the Castle. She was also remarkably skilful with her needle, and frequently spent hours in the dressing-room of her lady, occupied upon the costly laces and delicate embroidery which she expressed a disinclination to work at in her own apartment.

Now it so chanced that when Lady Ravenswood escaped from the presence of her inmates to the solitude of her chamber, she was too much engrossed by her own emotions to waste a thought on any other subject; and as the door of the dressing-room was nearly closed, and that the nature of Adèle's avocation did not involve the slightest noise, she was totally unconscious of her near neighbourhood; and while she gave a free-loose to the feelings by which she was overwhelmed, the keen-eyed *soubrette* plied her task and drew her own inferences undisturbed.

"*Bon!*" she murmured to herself; "there is miladi crying her heart out, and about what? Because her *vieux* has left her for a month or two. *Bah!* the thing is not possible; had it been Mr. Marston, or *ce beau capitaine* Willoughby who had gone to Scot-

land, one might understand it all well enough ; but *ce pauvre milord—Bétise !* She must be very glad to be rid of him for a time. Well, well ; *qui vivra, verra* ; and I am not likely to be her dupe. I will know what it all means before long, or my name is not Adèle Pompon ; and perhaps, when she finds that her secret is no secret to me, she may be glad to treat me with a little more confidence. Fortunately," she continued, with a low cunning chuckle ; " I have two hands as well as two ears, and a conscience elastic enough to earn my reward from both parties. I think it must be Monsieur Arthur, her cousin ; *ah, que c'est joli, un cousin !* But even if I am right I shall not be in a hurry to tell him so, *et pour cause*. How he hates our sick man ! I wonder for why ; but that he does hate him is certain ; I saw *that* at once when I told him that he was not to die. Is he jealous ? *ç'a se peut* ; however, I shall soon find out the truth."

Here the soliloquy of mademoiselle was interrupted by a gentle knock at her mistress's door, which was opened the next moment by Mrs. Carlyon.

" My poor dear Laura ;" she said fondly,

as she seated herself beside her friend, and passed an arm round her waist; "I feared that I should find you thus; and I have come to assure you of my sincere sympathy. I ask no questions, all I seek to do is to give you comfort; and, I trust, to bring you to a better frame of mind. Of what are you afraid now that you are left to your own guidance? Of yourself? Of *him*? Do more justice to both. That you have been, and still are, sorely tried, I know and feel; but your path of duty is plain before you, and you require only courage to pursue it to the end."

"Hush, Enna!" said the young Countess wildly; "do not tell me what you suspect—what you believe—for even from *you* I could not bear it."

"Have you never heard of the vital effect of the surgeon's probe, Laura?"

Lady Ravenswood averted her head.

"Remember that I know all your girlhood's history;" resolutely pursued Mrs. Carlyon; "that poor throbbing heart has no secret from me; and yet your readiness to become the wife of Lord Ravenswood, and your subsequent conduct, had almost induced me to hope that ——"

"Hope nothing, Enna; for, even scorned and despised as I have been, I cannot overcome my guilty passion."

"You are not guilty, Laura;" said her friend soothingly; "you can never become guilty; but that you are most unfortunate I do not attempt to deny."

"Unfortunate indeed!"

"Do not despair, however. You had bestowed your heart upon one who has as high a sense of honour as yourself, and who loves you too well to ask or accept any sacrifice of principle on your part."

"Loves me!" echoed the Countess bitterly; "aye, as he loves you his sister, or the Earl his guardian; but this was not the love he vowed to me before that fatal evening. Where is my pride that I cannot spurn him from me?"

"Ha! ha!" whispered Adèle, in her hiding-place; "*on arrive!*"

"Have you ever seriously endeavoured to do so?" asked Mrs. Carlyon. "Who knows, my dear Laura, but that it is the mere romance of a young fresh heart? you are still a mere girl; you must not blight a probably long life by a moral weakness."

“Aye!” exclaimed her companion impetuously; “‘He jests at scars who never felt a wound.’ *You* have not known the heart-ache of an isolated spirit. *Your* path has been over roses, and you cannot be expected to understand the sharpness of the thorns by which the feet of those who are less fortunate may be lacerated. I tell you, Enna, that mere girl as you may consider me, I have already lived a life of experience and suffering such as you will never know; a life in which hope and fear, trust and doubt, happiness and despair, have alternately played their parts. You are as well aware as I am that I was flung as a holocaust to the demon of vanity and ambition—a vanity in which I had no share, an ambition to which I was myself a stranger—I was bidden to content myself with a title—with a place at court—with a host of gilded playthings; I was never asked if I had a heart, and if that heart yearned for baubles such as these. Like a Roman victim I was crowned with roses, and led forth to fulfil my destiny. Do you ever ask yourself what that destiny has been—what it is likely to be? Do you ever deem it impossible that a pigmy should perform the task of a giant? I have

now been a wife eight months, and those eight months have worked a revolution in my whole being. Formerly, love was to me the most pure, the most ennobling, the most virtuous feeling upon earth; now it has degenerated into the most guilty and inflexible of realities. The struggle is beyond my strength."

"You are over-excited, Laura, and exaggerate the difficulties of your position. Look at it more calmly; confront it more boldly; and that struggle will be half overcome;" said Mrs. Carlyon gravely. "Rely on it that every woman's heart—could it be laid bare—would exhibit an amount of suffering of which the world little dreams. It is the painful attribute of our sex to find food for bitterness in details visible and tangible to ourselves alone; but this is a weakness against which it is our duty to contend. Do not, by dwelling upon your trials, exasperate them; and you will discover, sooner or later, that they may be borne with more philosophy than you are at the present moment prepared to admit. Habit is a strong helper in such a strife. As months and years pass on, you will gradually cease to remember your present

feelings; or should you still bear them in memory, it will only be to wonder that, gifted as you now are with youth, and health, and the affection of all around you, you could ever have repined at your fate."

Lady Ravenswood silently shook her head.

"Do not misunderstand me, my dear Laura;" pursued her companion; "I do not for a moment intend to vindicate your mother, whom I consider, in so far as regards yourself, to be one of the most ill-judging women upon earth; and you must forgive me if I confess this, as well as the fact that the *prestige* of your present rank does not produce the same effect upon me as it did upon Mrs. Heathcote. Be equally candid with me, and admit on your side, that beyond the disparity of years which exists between the Earl and yourself, you can find nothing in him to condemn; but, on the contrary, much to respect and love. You might have been united to a man, who, in addition to this objection—for I am frank, and allow it to be such—might have been less estimable in character, less high in principle, less equable in temper; while in Lord Ravenswood you possess an indulgent

and gifted companion, a sound adviser, and an inestimable friend. Middle age has not robbed him of one of his endearing qualities ; for he is still thoroughly young in heart, without any of that vanity and self-appreciation which so often diminish the real merit of a younger man. You may not, perhaps, be as proud of him in a ball-room as if he attracted the admiration, and you excited the envy, of a parcel of giddy girls ; but this would be a poor and pitiful regret of which I know you to be incapable ; and one, moreover, which too often detracts from the happiness of home."

" You are very eloquent, Enna ;" said the Countess ; " and I feel no inclination to refute any of your arguments ; but you talk as though my inner life had been a blank before my marriage. I am quite as well aware as you can be of all the good qualities of Lord Ravenswood ; and, had I known him before I had learnt to love another, I might have been the happiest of women as his wife ; but you do not require to be told that this was not the case. I am wretched because I was misled into the belief that I *was* loved ; and because when I had returned the passionate affection of which I was declared to be the

object, I was flung back upon myself, like a plaything that had ceased to please ; because I cannot, in my turn, compel myself to forget that it was once otherwise ; and that I daily and hourly feel that the constancy which, had I not been deceived, would have been a virtue, is, under existing circumstances, little less than a crime. To you only, Enna, could I, or *dare* I, confess so much ; and I am only too conscious that, even by you, I am misunderstood."

" You are wrong, Laura, very wrong ;" said Mrs. Carlyon ; " I do not misunderstand you for an instant ; but do you consider, my dear girl, that I should act the part of a true friend by encouraging you in a weakness which can only involve you in misery ? Would that by nursing your regrets I could alleviate them, as you would then have no suspicion of the sincerity of my affection. Can you have forgotten the delight with which I looked forward to the realisation of our common hope, or the bitterness of my regret when I found that my hope was to be disappointed ? It was unspoken, it is true ; but it must have been sufficiently evident, strive as I might against it."

“ *Mais enfin,*” muttered Adèle ; “ *who* is it ? ”

“ We will not pursue the subject further ; ” said Lady Ravenswood, rising from her seat ; “ where the heart cannot be convinced, the conviction of the head is worth little. You cannot despise me, Enna, more than I despise myself. My whole existence is a mockery—a painted deceit—a gilded lie—and I must live it out.”

Before Mrs. Carlyon had time to reply the door was softly opened by Martin.

“ I beg your pardon for disturbing you, madam ; ” she said, glancing anxiously from Enna to her mistress ; “ but Mr. Marston wishes to see you for a few minutes.”

“ Good-bye then, dearest, for the said few minutes ; ” smiled Mrs. Carlyon, affectionately pressing the cheek of her friend ; “ you will excuse me, I am sure, for you know how frightfully exacting all invalids are. I may come back, may I not ? ”

“ As soon as you please, and that you have permission to do so ; ” was the languid reply.

“ You are ill, my lady ; I am sure you are ill ; ” said Martin ; — “ oh, Miss Laura !

Miss Laura !” she pursued, bursting into tears. “ What does it all mean? It breaks my heart to see you.”

“ You are right, my dear Martin ;” replied the Countess, striving to rally ; “ I am not well. Remember that this is my first separation from your master, that my mother is absent, and that, kind and affectionate as Mrs. Carlyon may be, I find myself alone for the first time.”

“ But my lord is not gone abroad ; you can hear from him almost every day.”

“ That is quite true, and I know that my grief is very childish. I will struggle against it, Martin, but I have not yet had time.”

“ Shall I not make you a cup of tea, my lady ? ”

“ An excellent suggestion ;” said poor Laura, anxious to find herself alone once more ; “ nothing would refresh me so much.”

Martin departed on her mission ; but as she retired by one door, Mademoiselle Adèle made her appearance at the other, and rushing towards her mistress, threw herself on her knees beside the sofa, and hid her face among the cushions.

“ What is the matter, my poor girl ? ”

asked the Countess, alarmed at her apparent agitation : and then, suddenly remembering her conversation with Mrs. Carlyon, she added hurriedly ; “ How long have you been in my dressing-room ? ”

CHAPTER XVI.

A WORD IN SEASON.

“ENNA;” said Marston; “I can bear this suspense no longer. How is Laura?—how is Lady Ravenswood?”

“Just as you may suppose any young wife would be—just as I am afraid I shall be the first time that Augustus leaves me—as wretched and desolate as though there were only one individual in the world, and that one the absent husband. We poor women are sad fools, after all!”

“Then she really loves him?”

“A strange question from you, who know him so well. Who could live with the Earl and not love him?”

“True, most true, but ——”

“But what, Ferdinand?”

“It is a pity that she did not insist upon his remaining at home;” said Marston, evading

the question ; " I am quite sure that, had he suspected for a moment that she would have been so much overcome by his departure, he would not have left the Castle."

" I am glad, on the contrary, that she did not display such weakness ;" replied Mrs. Carlyon ; " for when once a woman marries she accepts the duties and sacrifices of her new life, or she is unworthy of the love and confidence of her husband. Laura is perfectly aware that this temporary separation is quite as painful to Lord Ravenswood as to herself, and she has no more right to shrink from it than he had."

" You should have been a Spartan matron, Enna."

" And why ? Are not we English women competent to bear the burthen which we have voluntarily taken upon ourselves, in order to lighten it for those we love ?"

" But Laura is yet a mere girl."

" Do not tell her so, for she will not agree with you. A few tears will leave no trace behind them, and to-morrow she will be more reconciled."

" Would that I could think so !"

" Why should you doubt it, Ferdinand ?"

—and as she spoke the fair young wife looked with anxious tenderness into her brother's face: "it is idle for you to attempt to withhold your secret from me. You still love Laura; and you cling to the belief that she, although married to another, is as weak and as faulty as yourself. Is this honourable? Is this manly? Is this worthy of you, and of your father's son?"

"Enna;" exclaimed Marston; "beware: there are some subjects which cannot be discussed even between my only sister and myself."

"Do not say so, Ferdinand; do not say so;" expostulated Mrs. Carlyon, bursting into tears; "I cannot bear this moral estrangement. Do you believe that I ever knew you to be unhappy without sharing in your sorrow, from whatever cause it may arise? Do I not love you fondly and truly? and is it not impossible for me to feel happy when you are otherwise? Rest assured that the grief which is locked up in the heart, and for which all sympathy is refused, is far more bitter than that which is poured out freely into the ear of one to whom your secret is as sacred as to yourself."

“What would you have me say?” asked Marston sadly. “Do you seek to despise me even more than you do now, by compelling me to acknowledge my fault? Surely I am already sufficiently degraded in my own eyes, in feeling that I have betrayed my weakness to another?”

“Listen to me, Ferdinand;” said his sister earnestly; “for the passion which you have not yet conquered you are, perhaps, more to be pitied than blamed, for when you first loved Laura you could not possibly foresee that your love might, one day, degenerate into guilt; and you may not yet have had time thoroughly to conquer it; but are you striving to do so? are you for ever dwelling upon the fact that her husband has been your benefactor from your boyhood, and that his honour should be as dear—aye, even dearer, to you than your own!”

“Enna, you are merciless!”

“Not so. If you wilfully stifle the whisperings of your conscience, it is my duty to give them voice. You are not true to yourself: your recent sufferings have enervated you both in body and mind; but this must no longer be; with returning physical strength you must resume your moral power, or your

life will become worthless both to yourself and others. Ravenswood Castle is no longer either a safe or a proper home for you ; and my firm advice is, that you should again leave England for a time. I am aware that it will require a great effort on your part to do this ; but, my dear, dear brother, that effort, painful as it cannot fail to be, must be made for all our sakes."

Marston buried his face in his hands, and fairly groaned aloud ; while Enna, trembling with agitation, stood before him anxiously awaiting his reply.

Her words had struck home. Never before had Ferdinand trusted himself to dwell upon this phase of the question ; but then and there he could shrink from its investigation no longer ; the skeleton was denuded of its drapery, and appeared to him in all its nakedness, rebuking his sensual self-indulgence, like the skull that tempered the mirth at the Egyptian banquet. He felt that there was poison in the dregs of the perfumed bowl which he had been holding so tenaciously to his lips, and he shuddered at the conviction.

"Trust me—" was all he said, as he grasped the hand of his tender and tearful monitor ;

and she *did* trust him, for she felt satisfied that she had exorcised the evil spirit, and that the veil was lifted.

Not, however, could the soul-struggle which must inevitably succeed this awakening to the light of better and higher impulses, be conquered in an instant. Human nature clings to its weaknesses far more strenuously than to its virtues; the rustling of angels' wings is inaudible until the storm is overpast; and Marston bitterly felt, as he uttered that brief pledge for the future, that he must wrestle fiercely and resolutely with himself in order to fulfil it. Compelled by his invalided state to remain for an uncertain period under the same roof with Laura; subjected to daily and hourly contact with the very being whom in justice alike to her and to himself he should have shunned; deprived of the protecting presence of the Earl; and left entirely dependent upon his own unassisted efforts, he could not conceal from himself that his position was a most onerous one; and his overtaxed heart sank within him as he remembered that days and weeks must still pass on, before he could emancipate himself from the sweet durance in which he would so willingly

have lived and died. Had Lady Ravenswood maintained the air of careless indifference which she had assumed before his illness, the trial might have been, in some degree, a less bitter one ; but now, to meet the clasp of her gentle hand, the soft light of her loving eyes, and the soothing influence of her smile, and to be compelled to avoid all response, was a moral martyrdom which seemed beyond his strength.

And yet it must be done. To that fact he could be blind no longer ; for was he not trifling with *her* peace as well as with his own ? Was he not basely undermining the happiness of his guardian's declining years—violating the sanctity of his home—betraying his generous confidence ? Was he not, in short, a serpent trailing its foul length over a soil which, but for his poisonous influence, might have brought forth nothing but wholesome plants ? And *could* he be so lost and fallen a wretch as to bequeath a curse where he should have left a blessing ?

“ No, no ; ” he murmured to himself ; “ let not the father's falsehood be perpetuated in the son. One victim should suffice. I will bend to fate, not brave it. The tragedy

of life will soon be played out, and there will be rest in the grave."

Poor Ferdinand! He wilfully overlooked the fact that he was still young, and that death comes not at the bidding of any man, however wretched; but summons the infant from its cradle, the bride from the arms of her bridegroom, the miser from his gold, and the conqueror from his laurelled crown, as well as the leper from his way-side hut, and the beggar from his rags.

The letters of the Earl were also a sore trial to Marston, breathing as they did the most fatherly affection and interest in his recovery.

"Do not suffer your lingering convalescence to depress your spirits, my dear boy;" he wrote on one occasion; "or to exhaust your patience. You are in the hands of those who love you too sincerely to spare one effort for your welfare. I am glad that you see Armstrong every day, and to receive such good accounts from him. He is a fine fellow, and no pecuniary recompense can ever repay his skill and zeal. I trust, however, that I shall shortly obtain an appointment for him, which will gratify his ambition, and increase

his practice. I have also had an opportunity of speaking of yourself to her Majesty; who, with her customary kindness of heart, expressed her sympathy in my anxiety; and recommended that, as soon as you were able to support the journey, you should try the effects of a new climate.

“ ‘ What say you to Berlin for instance, my lord ? ’ she asked graciously.

“ I answered by informing her Majesty that, even were you disposed to leave England, your present state of exhaustion would render such a step impossible; and that, moreover, you would be compelled on your arrival there to exchange the care of your sister, Lady Ravenswood, and myself, for that of strangers. I trust, my dear Ferdinand, that in thus replying I have only forestalled your own wishes; while I will not conceal that the idea of again parting from you startled and unnerved me. If you were not safe under *my* roof, how could I hope that you would be so elsewhere? And I confess to you that the happiness of my life would be incomplete were we to be again separated.”

Marston refolded the letter with a feeling of deep compunction at his heart. What re-

turn had he made for this paternal solicitude and tenderness? Enna was right. While his helplessness continued he must struggle against himself; but when his strength was restored, he must once more escape in exile the danger of Laura's society.

CHAPTER XVII.

MISTRESS AND MAID.

“ADÈLE, how long have you been in my dressing-room?”

“Oh, Miladi!” faltered out the *soubrette*, with a sparkle in her eye which was strongly at variance with the nervous quivering of her lips; “indeed, I am not to blame. Miladi knows;” she impetuously continued, exhibiting to her mistress a veil of Brussels lace, in which she had been repairing a rent; “Miladi well knows that I never remove things so precious as this to my own chamber; so there I sat quietly at work, when Miladi returned to her apartment; and I should at once have told her how I was occupied, had I not heard that she was weeping; when, *parole d’honneur*, Miladi, I had not courage to show myself.”

“And after the entrance of Mrs. Carlyon,

what did you hear?" demanded the Countess with a wild throbbing at her heart.

"Nothing, Miladi, nothing;" was the ready reply, as the crafty Frenchwoman affected to wipe away her tears; "absolutely nothing but what I have long suspected—long known."

"What have you suspected? What do you know?" asked Lady Ravenswood, whose emotion almost choked her voice.

"*Hélas! Hélas!* That, my dear lady, that my beautiful mistress is not happy! that she has been sacrificed to a *mariage de convenance!* that she does not love Milord! and that she does love ——"

"Whom?" almost shrieked out Laura.

Adèle was silent for an instant; and then, with glittering eyes and an ambiguous smile, she whispered beneath her breath,—

"*Le beau cousin de Miladi*, M. Willoughby."

"Adèle;" said the Countess, with a sigh of relief which was not lost upon the astute waiting-woman, as she rose haughtily from the sofa, and prepared to leave the room; "I have been mistaken in you, and find that you are a very dangerous person—an eaves-

dropper—who, unable to comprehend distinctly the meaning of what you overheard, are prepared to sacrifice my honour to your own unworthy and despicable suppositions. I *can* keep no such individual about my person; and you will, consequently, be prepared to quit my service immediately that you can be replaced. Captain Willoughby is the son of my aunt; and were not such the case, so great is my affection for him that he would never be a guest beneath my roof.”

Poor Laura! In her anxiety to justify herself in the eyes of a menial, she forgot the dignity of her sex and station; and, still worse, in her inexperience of the world and the world's ways, she

“did profess too much.”

It was with the most humble and contrite regrets that Adèle accepted her *congé*; nor was it until the dismissal had been given, that the Countess remembered that, even if the cunning of her waiting-woman had failed to discover the real object of her passion, she had at least possessed herself of the secret of its existence. What must be her next guess? What but the truth? — and then ——

She had reason to arrive at this conclusion. As she so vehemently denied all interest in Arthur Willoughby, the well-pleased *soubrette* murmured to herself,—

“ *Enfin me voilà ! Cette mouche ne pique pas.* Then it must be Mr. Marston.”

We have already inferred that, for reasons of her own, Adèle, independently of pecuniary considerations, was not sorry to find that the gallant Guardsman had no share in the regrets of her lady ; for he had made no slight havoc in her own very susceptible heart, a fact to which he was, no doubt, considerably indebted for the facility with which she had lent herself to his despicable schemes.

Enraged by the recovery of Ferdinand, and his domestication at the Castle, the virulence of his hatred knew no bounds ; and as the mutual affection of the Countess and Marston before the marriage of the former was, as we have shown, no secret to him, he resolved to place a spy upon their actions, who might be in a position to report to him such particulars as, by the exercise of a little ingenuity, could not fail, in his opinion, to excite the indignation of the Earl, and to cause the expulsion of Ferdinand from beneath the roof

of his guardian. He found a willing tool in Adèle, whose vanity he flattered by his affected admiration, and whose fidelity he undermined with his gold.

We have stated the feeling of alarm experienced by Laura as a new terror of the girl's penetration came upon her ; and although she had reached the door of her room, she recrossed the floor, took up her gloves from the table upon which she had flung them, and even arranged her hair before a mirror with as much calmness as she could assume. Not one of her movements was lost upon the Frenchwoman, who read her heart, and felt that, despite all her pride, the noble lady was in the toils ; while she moreover had no inclination to leave the Castle at so critical a moment, and thus lose the bright sovereigns of the gallant captain, and it might be also all trace of himself. It was, therefore, in a tone of entreaty, by which Lady Ravenswood, in consequence of her recent reflections, gradually suffered herself to be influenced, that the apparently penitent waiting-woman entreated forgiveness for her offence, and assured her too-willing listener that she had overheard but little of the conversation between Miladi and Mrs.

Carlyon ; but that, knowing Miladi to be married to a husband so many years older than herself, she had thought it impossible that it could be for him that she was weeping. Miladi must be good enough to remember that she was a Frenchwoman, and Frenchwomen did not grieve when their husbands left them for a few months. Madame la Duchesse, who had recommended her to Miladi, could answer for her discretion ; and nothing could give her greater pain than the idea of having offended *une si bonne maîtresse*."

"Dry your tears, Adèle ;" said the Countess coldly. "Your conduct has been very reprehensible, but I am willing to believe that you regret your fault, and that it will not be repeated. On condition that you pledge yourself to this, I will forgive you, but do not venture upon another trial of my forbearance."

The promise was eagerly given ; and after having kissed the hand of her mistress, the accomplished traitress curtsied, and left the room.

The conversation which had passed between his sister and himself produced a marked change in the manner of Marston towards Lady Ravenswood ; but the effort at coldness

and indifference which succeeded to his previous enthusiastic gratitude, assumed a very different aspect to that which had so deeply wounded her on his first return to England. The perpetual struggle against his real feelings rendered him harsh and bitter, and it was easy to perceive that he was acting a part. At times, strive as he might against it, he yielded for an instant to the softer emotions of his nature ; but he no sooner became aware that he had done so, than he grew colder and sterner than before. The anxious care, the watchful attentions, and the delicate gentleness of Laura ; the consciousness that his affection was reciprocated, and the recollection of all that she had been to him throughout his long and weary sufferings, had endeared her to him a hundred-fold more than ever. How often had he detected tears of the most sympathising sorrow in her eyes during his paroxysms of pain, or periods of exhaustion ; tears which betrayed more of the inward workings of her spirit than any noisy and demonstrative grief could have ever done ; and now he was to forget all these things, and, in order to fulfil his duty as a man of honour, to compel himself to appear in the eyes of her whom he loved

best on earth as a monster of ingratitude, who, while he needed her care and kindness, had affected to appreciate them at their full value; but who no sooner felt that with returning strength he was becoming independent of others, than he threw aside every sense of obligation, and proved himself unworthy of the important moral debt which he had incurred.

Yes: revolt as he might against the task set before him, it could not be evaded; and the earnest conviction of this fact had no sooner forced itself upon his reason than he relapsed into a state of prostration which excited great uneasiness both in his sister and Lady Ravenswood. He sat for hours in the same attitude, buried in thought, with a book in his hand of which he seldom turned over a leaf, while an expression of pain occasionally passed across his face, which convinced his anxious watchers that the mind was suffering more acutely than the body. Deep and unconscious sighs escaped him, and his eyes remained fixed on vacancy; and then he would suddenly rouse himself to utter a bitter jest, or to dissent from some opinion which had been expressed, as if to impress on those

about him his total want of sympathy in their tastes and feelings. Mr. Armstrong alone, when appealed to by Carlyon or his wife,—for Laura never addressed a question to him upon the subject—declared that it arose from an irregular circulation, and the irritation inseparable from so long and tedious a period of inaction.

“You must remember;” he said; “that our invalid is young, and naturally active both in mind and body, and that he has been for many weeks unable to exert either. He is progressing satisfactorily it is true, but the weakening effects of the fever still cling to him. Get him into the open air as much as you can, and that his strength will permit. He is evidently reluctant to make any exertion, but he must be induced to do so. Instead of his monotonous daily drive in the garden-chair, prevail on him to walk, though it should only be a hundred yards at a time, and I will answer for the good effects of the change.”

In accordance with this advice, Carlyon, some hours later, urged upon his friend the expediency of making the attempt; but for a time Ferdinand resisted with a pertinacity which surprised and astonished his brother-

in-law, until the latter chanced to remark that the ladies were from home, and that he had consequently an excellent opportunity of making the effort for the first time.

"I know, Marston ;" he said with a smile ; " that we men never, under any circumstances, like to parade our physical weakness before women, and therefore it is that I am anxious to be your only companion on this occasion."

" So be it, then, Augustus ;" was the languid reply ; " I suppose that I cannot pass the remainder of my life in an easy chair, and that the trial must be made, sooner or later. Moreover, as I have decided to remove to Marston Place as soon as Armstrong will allow me to do so, where I trust that Enna and you will accompany me, I shall have need of a little practice before I venture to trust to my limbs."

" I shall not overtax them to-day ;" said Carlyon ; " as I have promised your sister to ride to the post-town for some new music that she wishes to purchase ; so that, when I have once more established you in the library, I shall start, in order to be back in time for dinner."

Ferdinand hesitated no longer ; but, lean-

ing heavily upon the arm of his companion, passed through the door of the conservatory to the lawn.

"Bravely done!" exclaimed Carlyon cheerfully; "and now that you have the cool grass under your feet we shall get on capitally."

The words were scarcely spoken when his eye fell upon the advancing forms of his wife and the Countess, who were just emerging from the lime-avenue with their hands full of choice flowers which they had been gathering in one of the forcing-houses. Laura was the first to perceive their approach; and, throwing her little basket to the ground, she sprang forward with a cry of joy to greet the invalid. Marston tottered and turned pale; never had he seen her look so lovely as she did at that moment: her beautiful hair disordered by the wind, her cheek glowing with animation, and her eyes literally dancing in their own light.

"Traitor!" she said playfully; "was it fair to cheat Enna and myself out of our well-won privilege of sharing in your first walk from its commencement to its close? Rest assured that I shall encourage no such insubordination; and in order to punish you, I now command you to exchange the arm of Au-

gustus for mine. What will Lord Ravenswood say on his return should he find that I am no longer your head-nurse?"

"But I lean so heavily, my dear Lady Ravenswood;" faltered Marston, affecting not to notice the gesture by which Laura had accompanied her words, and still clinging to Carlyon; "I assure you that your intended kindness is beyond your strength."

"Then your sister shall assist me; for, decidedly, we will permit no interference with our rights."

Thus urged, Ferdinand had no alternative but to obey, and he passed his arm through the fair and delicate one of the Countess, though not without an emotion which he could scarcely repress.

Let no one imagine that this importunity on the part of Laura was induced by any latent coquetry; forgetting all, save the weakness and languor of the invalid, she pressed her services upon him as she would have pressed them under similar circumstances upon a husband or a brother. Whatever might be the result produced by her unfortunate attachment upon her heart, her nature was still unspoiled by the world; she had not

yet thrown off the girl with all her graceful simplicity and self-abnegation. She lived, so to say, a dual existence; her hidden life was, as we have seen, stormy and struggling, but it had hitherto produced no lasting effect upon those purer and holier feelings which, although crushed for a time, were far from annihilated.

This may appear an extraordinary assertion to such as have not closely studied the intricacies of our poor fallible human nature; but how frequently does it happen that we are an enigma even to ourselves.

“ We see the right, and yet the wrong pursue,”

while we are weeping over our weakness, and earnestly praying to conquer it. With this consciousness of our own fallibility let us be slow to blame the short-comings of others; and let us entreat our readers to remember that, although no justification could or should be attempted in the case of the young Countess, she was yet at an age when the greater part of her sex are still engrossed by trifles, and ignorant of the fact that life can present less brilliant aspects than those of a ball-room or an opera-house.

The trial which Laura was so early fated

to undergo, and the position in which she had been placed by the idle ambition of her shortsighted mother, were both, moreover, exceptional. Had she not been domesticated with Marston after her marriage, it is probable that her warm and loving heart, which, like a climbing plant, stretched forth its tendrils on every side, and clung to all around her, would have ceased, after a time, to yearn for the first support to which it had linked itself, and have thrown out its leaves and blossoms in beautiful profusion to adorn that which must henceforward be its prop and stay ; but there, close beside her, and yet beyond her reach—so near, and yet so hopelessly afar off—stood that proffered, that coveted, that cherished protection against the rough winds and the tempest-clouds of existence ; ever before her, ever reminding her of the happiness that she had lost.

Again, we say, that we must not be misunderstood. In attempting the portraiture of a woman who once lived, but who has now found rest in her grave—rest for her wounded heart—rest for her crushed spirit and her blighted hope—we would fain palliate, in so far as it is permitted to us to do so, what we

are compelled to blame. But let it not for an instant be forgotten that we hold her up as no example to others; as no lighthouse to guide the storm-tossed vessel to a safe and welcome haven; but rather as one of those sunken rocks, from whose vicinity the weary pilot must carefully guide his bark, if he would preserve it from destruction. But we anticipate.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE WORLD *v.* THE HEART.

"It would appear, Marston;" said Carlyon gaily, as Enna took possession of her brother's unoccupied arm, and assisted her friend in sustaining his languid footsteps; "that, during the absence of Lord Ravenswood, we must quietly resign ourselves to serve under a petticoat government. Here is our project of enjoying a tranquil conversation under the trees, without interruption or intrusion, scattered to the winds by the imperious fiat of two wilful young ladies, who are so little accustomed to opposition, that they take our obedience for granted, and fearlessly set us at defiance. Well, after all, we only share the fate of Cæsar, and must bear our yoke as lightly and as gracefully as we can."

"You have come to a very notable and praiseworthy decision, Augustus;" smiled his

wife ; “ and to prove that I have faith in your good intentions, I now command you to lose no time in procuring my music ; for, if you loiter with us much longer, you will not be back soon enough to assist Lady Ravenswood in doing the honours of the dinner-table.”

“ And I have wherewithal to amuse Mr. Marston until your return ; ” said Laura, holding up a couple of letters ; “ therefore you need not fear that we shall miss you during your absence.”

“ May I ask the names of your correspondents ? ”

“ Certainly ; one is my Aunt Willoughby, and the other Miss Armitage.”

“ So the match has come off ? ”

“ Oh, yes ; even although I was assured that *my* presence was indispensable on the occasion. Only imagine my leaving home at this season ; and breathing, or rather panting town air, in order to see two middle-aged simpletons make a spectacle of themselves in a fashionable London church ! ”

“ Well, now I’m off ; ” said Carlyon ; “ and I should advise you ladies to find a shady seat for your charge as soon as possible.”

“ There is one yonder under the great

sycamore;" replied the Countess; "where we shall not only secure shade, but air also. Think you that you can venture so far?" she asked anxiously of Ferdinand.

"I will at least endeavour to do so;" was the rejoinder; "but it really pains me to be such a burthen to you."

"Not a word;" said Laura reproachfully.

"Enna! Enna! I want you for one moment;" shouted Carlyon, who was already on his way back to the Castle.

"Do you think that you can spare me for an instant, Ferdinand?" asked his sister.

"Of course he can;" said Lady Ravenswood hastily; "he has only to lean a little more heavily upon me; so run away, and take leave of your husband before he sets forth upon his perilous journey."

Enna needed no second bidding, for it was Augustus who summoned her, and that sufficed; and Laura and Marston had scarcely taken a dozen steps onward before her graceful figure and white drapery had disappeared among the trees.

"How very, very good you are!" murmured Ferdinand, bending down to meet the eyes of his companion.

“Then you must be good in your turn ;” replied Laura, with a smile and a slight blush which did not escape his observation ; “see, in another moment we shall have reached our resting-place ; and there you must be content to remain for half-an-hour at least, in order to recover from this first exertion.”

At length they stood under the sycamore ; and the Countess having carefully established the invalid on the commodious garden-chair which it overshadowed, seated herself beside him.

“I have also received a letter by this morning’s post ;” said Ferdinand, after he had rested for a few minutes, during which Laura had flitted across the lawn to pick up the flower-basket that she had so carelessly flung upon the grass ; “and one in which you are interested, as it comes from your husband.”

“Indeed !” exclaimed Lady Ravenswood, with a playful pretence of indignation ; “I feel extremely flattered that he should find time to write to others when I am overlooked.”

“Do not say so. The fact is, that it contains mere matters of business which would but weary *you* ; and, moreover, I am to announce the arrival of another to yourself to-

morrow ; his occupations not having permitted him to follow the dictates of his inclination, which would have led him to inclose it with my own."

"He is well, I trust?"

"Much better, he assures me, than when he left the Castle ; but still he says that he yearns for home and its dear inhabitants. A life of perpetual representation, as you well know, does not suit his tastes ; and he is no longer young enough ——"

Marston suddenly paused ; he felt the indiscretion of which he had been guilty—the dangerous ground on which he had recklessly intruded—and a hot flush passed across his pale cheek.

"True ;" murmured his companion, as if unconsciously.

"Lord Ravenswood is so retiring and domestic in his habits ;" pursued Ferdinand hurriedly ; "that to be always *en évidence* in a court circle, must, as a natural consequence, be irksome to him."

"No doubt of it ;" was once more the absent rejoinder. "But here comes our dear Enna."

"Ha !" exclaimed Mrs. Carlyon, as she

stood before them, flushed with exercise and happiness ; “ so you are fairly installed ; but I trust that you have not, during my brief absence, been treacherous enough to rob me of my share in Lady Willoughby’s no doubt graphic and important communication.”

“ Certainly not ; ” said her friend, smothering a sigh which forced itself to her lips, and resolutely averting her face from Ferdinand, as she moved upon her seat to make way for Enna.

“ And how do you feel, my dear brother, after this unwonted exertion ? ” asked the young wife anxiously, as she took his hand, and raised it to her lips : “ Does not this gentle breeze refresh you ? ”

“ Greatly ; ” said Marston ; “ and I at last begin to hope that I shall not much longer remain the helpless invalid who has created so much anxiety, and exacted so much indulgence.”

“ And now for Lady Willoughby, and her matrimonial bulletin ; ” laughed Mrs. Carlyon ; “ I can imagine that she has shone out in all her glory during the auspicious nuptials of her niece and the Honourable Saville.”

“ So it would appear ; ” replied Laura, once more drawing out the letter, and removing it from its envelope. “ It is true that I have as

yet only read a few lines, but even in those I discovered that her gratification had been unbounded, and her vanity fully satisfied. You shall judge for yourself. Thus she writes:—

“ ‘MY DEAR NIECE,

“ ‘At last I have opportunity and leisure to inform you that Dora Cleveland is Dora Cleveland no longer. You will, however, before this reaches you, have received the ‘Morning Post,’ containing an account of the ceremony, and a list of the persons who attended it. Everything went off exceedingly well; and much to the satisfaction of Sir Marmaduke and myself, who may fairly both be congratulated on the success of our efforts to establish the poor dear girl suitably in life. I say *suitably*, because, although her fortune is small, it is yet sufficient to secure the honour and dignity of her family, and to satisfy that of Mr. Thornton,—all of whom behaved admirably well on the occasion—while there is no disparity of years between them,—a thing which I especially detest ——’ ”

Laura’s voice faltered for an instant, but she resolutely continued:—

“I am peculiar, as you are aware, on some points, and this is one of them. You may tell me that I am myself many years younger than my husband, and I shall not deny the fact; but mine was an exceptional case. I had little or no property, and still less connexion, as I understand the term, and I wanted both, deeply feeling that I was not of a nature coldly to brook an existence of obscurity. I knew the path of life which I *ought* to follow, and I consequently entered upon it without reluctance or misgiving. Had I been an heiress as you were, Laura, or even a penniless woman of rank, I should no doubt have hesitated; but, under the circumstances I have mentioned, I considered it a duty which I owed to myself to overcome minor obstacles by strength of mind; and you see what a wife I have made to your uncle, and what a mother to my dear Arthur. I had, besides, immense knowledge of the world, and assumed my place in society without effort or timidity. All these things should be taken into consideration; and when they are so, you will feel that I, at least, am exonerated from all suspicion of folly or inconsistency. You will perceive, my dear niece, that I am talking to

you as I would talk to my own child, and you will at once give me credit for the motive by which I am induced to do so, when you remember the very painful position in which you would have been placed without the advantage of my example and support during the late gathering at Ravenswood Castle. I know, of course, the great attraction of a coronet ; but still — Well, well, my advice was never asked, and therefore I will say nothing more upon the subject, save, indeed, this, that although one of my nieces did not consider my presence to be essential at her marriage, another did. However, even if I felt hurt at the time, I have since proved that I could forgive the slight by consenting to become the guest of yourself and your husband ; nor need you fear that I shall ever resent it ; therefore, whenever you feel that I can be of service to you, either at the Castle or in Belgrave Square, do not hesitate to ask me to your house. I have, however, been led away by the interest which I take in your happiness from the real subject-matter of my letter.

“ ‘Dora really looked remarkably well—considering ; and Mr. Thornton happened

very fortunately to be more than usually free from gout. Of course the bride's height was greatly in her favour, and the veil softened her down surprisingly. She had eight bridesmaids, one of whom was her youngest sister,—an additional expense to Sir Marmaduke, as I need not explain, but as he did not complain, I of course felt no inclination to do so. Gunter laid down the breakfast admirably, and we were five-and-thirty at table, one-third of the guests being persons of rank; so that, had you consented to join the party, you perceive, Laura, that even Lady Ravenswood, Countess and Court-lady as she is, would not have found herself out of her proper sphere. At four o'clock the newly-married pair left Bryanston Square for the Continent, and the whole affair was over, greatly to my relief, as I was becoming fatigued, and Sir Marmaduke was getting fidgety. We have now another of the girls on our hands; and I trust that on your return to town you will assist me in introducing her. With your opportunities you may, if you really wish to oblige me, get her off in a season.

“When do you expect your mother home? I cannot conceive what could induce her at

her age to go wandering about the world like a modern Cassandra, particularly when you require so much advice and assistance. However, do not let that trouble you; for, as I have already said, you may always depend upon me. Indeed—should you wish it—I could run down to you in a few days for five or six weeks at this present time, as the marriage bustle is now over, and I have no particular reason for remaining in town. I had a vague idea of accompanying Mr. and Mrs. Thornton on their wedding tour, but did not choose the proposal to emanate from myself; thinking, as I had every right to do, that the heavy obligations which Dora had incurred towards me and her uncle ought to have suggested the propriety of its coming from herself. The subject was, however, never mentioned; a fact at which you will be the less surprised when I tell you that Mr. Thornton wished Rachel to go with them, and pleased enough the poor girl was at the prospect of seeing Paris and Italy in so agreeable a manner; but Dora would not hear of such a thing, declaring that they should find travelling quite expensive enough as it was, without adding to their party—an argument which, between

ourselves, soon convinced her bridegroom. So they started alone, and by so doing left me at perfect liberty to be useful to you,—an assurance which I feel convinced will be welcome to your little party, particularly under the disagreeable and difficult circumstances in which you are placed. I shall be the better pleased to renew my acquaintance with Mrs. Gore Cunningham, that she really behaved extremely well about Dora and Mr. Thornton, and may, it is probable enough, help me off with Rachel, in whom I could interest her while staying at the Castle. I hear that Jessie Armitage and Innes Carlyon are engaged, and consider it extremely silly for any one to have encouraged two such mere children even to dream of marriage. Besides, match-making is as absurd as it is odious; for if matters turn out well, the married couple take all the credit to themselves; while if, on the contrary, the thing is a failure, they are sure to visit their unhappiness upon the officious friend who misled their judgment. I throw this out as a hint to you, Laura, and hope that you will profit by it.

“*Apropos* of marriages, if Mr. Marston should survive his wound, it strikes me that

he could not do better than make up to Miss Gore Cunningham. She is the belle of the county, has a nice little fortune, and I have a strong suspicion would not be unwilling to listen to him. Now this I say to you, my dear, out of pure kindness of heart; for I confess that I *do* feel considerably aggrieved by the headlong imprudence and want of self-government which he evinced in involving himself in a quarrel, at a time when the Castle was full of company, and thus spoiling the whole affair. I may tell you in confidence that Arthur perfectly agrees with me; he cannot tolerate the mention of his name. However, I am more indulgent, for I know that the young man has good points about him; and had he had sense enough to make me his confidante before he got into that ridiculous scrape—for that he *did* get into a scrape, and from what I can gather from others who have heard all the circumstances of the case, wilfully provoke it—I have no doubt but that I should have been able to have prevented the silly business altogether. However, I trust that your hopes may be realised, and that he may not suffer fatally from the effects of his own folly, although you will do well to be

prepared for the worst, for there is never any knowing how these things will end.

“ ‘Awaiting your reply respecting my return to Ravenswood, I am always,

“ ‘My dear Niece,

“ ‘With Sir Marmaduke’s kind love,

“ ‘Your affectionate Aunt,

“ ‘SUSANNAH WILLOUGHBY.’ ”

As she finished reading the letter, the young Countess glanced towards Marston, whose lowering brow and quivering lip told of an inward struggle; while Enna, alive only to the absurdity of Lady Willoughby’s worldly sententiousness, exclaimed gaily,—

“ *There* is encouragement for you to get well, Ferdinand! Actually a wife prepared for you by a zealous friend, who detests matchmaking on principle. And then, naughty boy that you are, you have incurred the displeasure of the refined and fastidious Mr. Willoughby of the Life Guards. Think of that! You will do well to rouse yourself, and redeem your character, or no one can foretell the consequences. But really;” she continued in a graver tone; “you must excuse my saying, my dear Laura, that your aunt’s

epistolary talent is of the most erratic description; and, like a will-of-the-wisp, involves one in strange quagmires. One thing is certain, however, that her delight in getting rid of her antiquated and hard-featured niece is as genuine as her indignation at your refusal to attend the marriage."

"Or to invite her to mine;" said Laura, almost inaudibly.

"Perhaps that was a mistake."

"I think not. She was out of town, and had not behaved well to my mother."

"Ah, that alters the case! It would appear that we may expect her shortly."

"Not through any agency of mine;" said the Countess hurriedly. "I invite no guests during Lord Ravenswood's absence. I desire none—nor do I wish the interference of Mrs. Gore Cunningham in any of our family arrangements."

"I am more liberal;" rejoined Mrs. Carlyon, looking fixedly at her friend; "and feel all possible gratitude for her kindness in providing me with a sister-in-law."

"Pray be serious for one moment, Enna;" said Marston peevishly: "one would really imagine that 'marrying, and giving in mar-

riage,' were the sole occupation of a woman's thoughts."

"But to return to Mrs. Saville Thornton;" persisted his sister, affecting not to notice his querulousness; "only imagine the red-haired, large-boned Dorothy Cleveland in a bridal veil an hour before noon! No doubt that, as her aunt informs us, everything went off exceedingly well, for she must have looked like the setting sun beaming through a cloud; while he ——"

"Well, what of him?" asked Marston, with a harshness which startled both his companions.

"Why, he must have produced the effect of a cloud, with no sun behind it, particularly if he had any misgivings as to the quality of the forthcoming breakfast, or the vintage of the champagne."

Even Ferdinand could not suppress a smile, while Laura laughed aloud.

"But you said that you had another letter to communicate to us, *Madame la Comtesse*;" said the light-hearted young wife, who, since the recovery of her brother, did not seem to have a care or a fear in the world. "Is it a worthy *pendant* to your aunt's?"

"By no means, as you will not be surprised to hear when I tell you that it is from our sweet Jessie."

"Ah, she will, indeed, be a sister-in-law after my own heart."

"Of that I am quite sure; nor has Innes proved less agreeable to Mr. Armitage."

"Dear Innes!" murmured Mrs. Carlyon affectionately.

"Listen!" said the Countess.

"My dear Lady Ravenswood—No, if I begin in that way, I shall never be able to pour out my whole heart to you as I want to do. My dear Laura! that sounds better, does it not? How I pine for you, if, indeed, I can now be said to pine for anything! How I long to lay my head upon your shoulder, and to tell you how very, very happy I am! You have already gone through all this."

Laura paused, hesitated, and finally ran her eye in silence to the bottom of the page, which she hurriedly turned over.

"At first papa looked rather gravely at Innes. He thought him too handsome; as if a man could ever be too handsome! Too

young—why, you know he is three years older than me! Not rich enough—but that, of course, was nonsense, as I soon convinced daddy. Did you ever hear such strange objections? As you may believe, I told him at once that *I* did not consider Innes one bit too handsome, and that I hated ugly men (which, I dare say, is very silly, but I cannot help it); that I would not have had him a year older for the world; and that, in short, my mind was quite made up upon the subject. Well, would you credit it? Papa is already almost as much in love with him as I am, and can scarcely bear him out of his sight. It is, ‘Innes, my dear fellow,’ here, and ‘Innes, my dear fellow,’ there, until I am almost jealous, and can scarcely restrain a pout; but, after all, it is very pleasant, is it not? And then we talk of you; of that sweet Enna, who is to be my sister; of Mr. Marston, and Lord Ravenswood; so that the happy old gentleman gathers you in imagination round his easy chair, and feels quite at home with you all. Poor Innes! there is only one drawback to his perfect satisfaction, he says, and that is the fear of being recalled to his post before—you may guess what—has taken place; but this foolish fancy never troubles me, be-

cause I have resolved that leave England he *shall* not before I am privileged to go with him. You cannot imagine what a sensation he has made in our neighbourhood; and what oceans of advice have been poured upon poor little me by the friends of the family. I can assure you that I have fairly gasped under the infliction. I earnestly trust that when you write—and pray let it be soon—you will be able to send me a favourable account of Mr. Marston, who (of course, with the exception of Innes,) is, I think, the most charming young man I ever met. I am not surprised that his sister loves him so dearly.’ ”

“ I wonder if she showed Innes her letter ; ” said Mrs. Carlyon, with a saucy smile.

“ Why should she not ? ” asked Ferdinand. “ With a heart full of the image of another, she may fairly be permitted to say a few kind words of a poor, useless invalid.”

“ Do not flatter yourself that you will much longer be entitled to plead your invalidism ; ” laughed his sister. “ I declare that to-day you are more like your real self than you have ever been since your illness. It quite cheers me to look at you.”

“*Dear Enna!*” whispered Marston, extending his hand to her, as she bent lovingly towards him; “I do, indeed, feel as though my probation were drawing to a close.”

“Probation!” murmured Laura to herself; and then, as if afraid to dwell upon the subject, she turned once more to the letter of Jessie.

“‘I am not surprised,’” she slowly repeated; “‘that his sister loves him so dearly. I only wish that I had a right to share in her affection. I should like just such a brother: one to look up to as a superior being, who would always guide me into the right path. Is it true that he is going to be married to that pretty, affected, self-worshipping Miss Gore Cunningham? I sincerely hope not; for I am quite sure that she is not good enough for him, and I shall be sadly disappointed if he sacrifices himself to mere beauty; which Innes, who is as anxious as I am on the subject, assures me soon loses its charm when it is a woman’s only attraction.

“‘But you will by this time be weary of my nonsense, dearest Laura, and I therefore reluctantly conclude, repeating the hope that

you will soon bestow half an hour on your
loving JESSIE.'"

As Lady Ravenswood refolded the letter Enna glanced towards her brother, and was startled by his sudden and extraordinary paleness, and the languor with which he leant back in his seat.

“Are you ill, Ferdinand? Are you faint?” she asked, as she sprang up and pillowed his head upon her arm, while Laura uttered a suppressed cry.

"Is not the heat painfully oppressive?" gasped out Marston.

"By no means, my dear brother."

"I thought—I felt—there is a strange weight crushing me down."

“Ferdinand, my own dear Ferdinand, what is the matter?”

There was no reply. The invalid had fainted.

“ Oh! what have we done, Laura?” exclaimed Mrs. Carlyon, turning to the young Countess, who was standing as motionless before her as though she had been stricken into stone. “ His hands are as cold as death, and he is utterly unconscious. My dear, dear brother!”

“We must have help, Enna,—instant help”—said Laura in a hoarse whisper; “we have been very imprudent, and must endeavour to repair our fault. Perhaps Carlyon is returned; run to the Castle and ascertain this. I will watch over your brother.”

Resigning her clasp of Marston, the terrified girl rushed away.

The head of the invalid now rested on the shoulder of the Countess. His eyes were closed; his parted lips livid; while a cold dew had settled upon his forehead; his arms hung powerless at his side; and he looked as though death had really come to him under the very circumstances in which he had so often prayed to die.

As minute followed minute, the alarm of Laura increased. She seized his hands, and endeavoured to warm them within her own, but they remained icy and nerveless. She thrust back the clinging hair from his brow and cheeks, and wiped away the clammy moisture which had gathered there, but not a feature stirred.

“Speak! Ferdinand, speak!” she at length exclaimed, overcome by agony and terror; “it is not possible—you cannot be

dead—you must hear and answer me, or I shall lose my senses! Ferdinand, my own and only one! the dream of my youth! my all in this life! Only one word—only one—to satisfy me that you hear and know me ——”

There was no reply.

“Cruel! cruel!” wept the unhappy woman, as she drew his pallid face to her bosom, and pressed her lips to his marble-like forehead: “and is this to be the reward of all my love—of all my suffering?”

Again she bent over him; again she forgot all save her agony. She called him by the most endearing names; she reproached him in the most tender whispers. She was no longer mistress of herself; surrounding objects swam before her eyes. She saw him, and him only; while she was yet so bewildered by her emotions, that she did not remark how the blood was struggling back to his cheek, and that a faint quiver played about his mouth.

How delicious was that gradual awakening to Marston! He feared to move a limb, lest the vision should dissolve into thin air, and he should once more be alone with his sorrow

and his regrets. Again and again he felt the soft pressure of the trembling lips upon his brow: again and again he caught the low murmurs of passionate tenderness, which fell like far-off spirit-music upon his ear; but at length he could control himself no longer; and by a violent effort he clasped his arms about her, and folded her to his heart.

The suddenness of the motion recalled the fleeting senses of the young Countess; and in an instant she released herself from his clasp, and stood erect and cold before him. While she believed him to be dying, she had been unable to control her feelings; but now, when she knew that he was conscious of her weakness, she spurned it from her.

She felt that her foot had been on the verge of a precipice, and recoiled.

CHAPTER XIX.

AN AVOWAL.

FERDINAND was carried to his room a sadder, if not a wiser man. He knew that, deep as had been his previous sorrow, there was still a lower depth to which he had now fallen. His moral courage was utterly annihilated; he had felt his brow burn beneath the lips of Laura; he had felt the throbbings of her heart as it leant against his own, and those memories could never be effaced. As occasionally the recollection of his guardian intruded itself upon him, he no longer dwelt upon it in order to strengthen his good resolutions, but impatiently waved it away to make room for a fairer and a dearer image.

Only a few weeks before he had risked his life in defence of that guardian's honour, and to avert from Laura the pollution of a ribald tongue; and now he was encouraging

visions which could only be realised by the overthrow of all that he should have held most sacred.

Nothing could be more dull and dispiriting than the aspect of the little party at this period. The health of Marston visibly declined, greatly to the mortification and disappointment of Mr. Armstrong; the Countess, although as gentle and as zealous as ever in her care of her patient, was more guarded, and evidently ill at ease; while Carlyon and Enna were lost in wonder at the sudden change that involved them in fresh anxiety. Ferdinand sometimes remained the whole day in his chamber; and when he suffered himself to be prevailed upon to appear in the drawing-room he seldom remained there more than a few minutes at a time, alleging that he could not support the fatigue of conversation; and he invariably retired more pale and agitated than he had entered. The sight of Laura produced a marked and painful effect upon him; and, immediately that he became conscious of his inability to conceal his feelings, he escaped from her presence like a culprit who feared that his guilt must be branded upon his brow. On her side, Lady

Ravenswood never made an effort to detain him; she felt self-convicted, and feared to venture upon a remonstrance. She tried to believe that she should gradually become reconciled to this moral estrangement, that she had wounded the delicacy of Marston in forfeiting her own, and that it was better he should thus evince his sense of her want of self-control; but nevertheless, while she was humbled in her own eyes, she inwardly resented his coldness.

At infrequent intervals the neighbouring county families called at the Castle, but rather for the purpose of maintaining their footing there than from any other motive; the gay and happy seldom feeling any real sympathy with the sick or the sorrowing; but even these rare visits were unwelcome to its inhabitants, who had no longer anything in common with their pleasure-loving guests. When the heart is worn and weary, indifferent society becomes irksome and importunate; it would fain conceal its secret, and yet revolts at the fact that it is unpitied.

Thus were things situated when the Countess one morning sent to request that Marston would breakfast with Enna and herself, as she

had something of importance to communicate to him. Carlyon had been suddenly summoned to town on legal business; and since his departure the invalid had secluded himself more than ever. Laura was pale and excited, and it was easy to perceive that she had passed a restless night.

"Forgive me for having disturbed you thus early;" she said, as she kindly but gravely extended her hand to Ferdinand; "but something so extraordinary has taken place, that I have considered it absolutely necessary to inform you of it."

"What terrible event has happened?" asked Enna half jestingly.

"I am quite prepared to be laughed at;" replied the Countess; "but shall not be deterred from my purpose by any consideration of that kind. Nay, I will even request you to listen to me seriously; as my nerves were so much shaken last night that I am in no humour for raillery."

"What *can* you mean, Laura?" demanded Mrs. Carlyon anxiously.

"You remember, Enna," said Lady Ravenswood; "that it was past eleven o'clock when we parted. The window of my dressing-room

was still open, and, as I felt no inclination to sleep, I sat down beside it in order to enjoy the perfume of the flowers and the delicious tranquillity of the hour. From the starlit sky my eyes wandered earthward, and rested upon the lawn, while I listened to the whisper-like quiverings of the leaves. I was, in short, indulging in one of those waking dreams which seem like glimpses of our spiritual existence, when I was startled from my reverie by something that I cannot help believing would have alarmed a person much more brave than myself."

"What was it?" exclaimed Enna. "My dear Laura, you quite terrify me!"

Even Marston now bent forward to listen.

"I saw," said the Countess, whose lip was trembling with agitation; "a tall figure standing at the entrance of the lime-avenue."

"Or, perhaps," suggested Ferdinand; "one of the trees bending to the night-air."

"It is probable that I should have come to the same conclusion," said the Countess; "if lime-trees were in the habit of walking. Moreover, the gigantic form gradually diminished in stature as it advanced into the light, and I soon convinced myself that it was

that of a man wrapped in a cloak, in which he was enveloped from head to foot. I do not seek to conceal that I was very much alarmed; and my alarm increased when I saw him disengage his arm from the folds of his mantle, and draw out a bunch of keys; hold them in the moonlight for a moment, and select one with which he forthwith opened the door of the back staircase, when he disappeared."

"What did you do in this emergency?" demanded Marston.

"I rushed into my bedroom, which I found in total darkness, my night-lamp having been extinguished by the draught from the open window. Had I given myself time to reflect, I might have been sure that such must be the case, or the intruder, be he whom he might, would not so unceremoniously have ventured to enter the Castle at this unseemly hour. I rang; and Adèle, after a short delay, answered my summons. Her room opens upon the staircase to which I have alluded, and I was not without a hope that she would be able to explain the circumstance. I was disappointed, however, for she listened to my tale with such an expression of astonishment and incredulity,

that I could not endure her presence, and dismissed her in a few minutes. I was so painfully agitated that it was impossible to brook her mocking smile without irritation."

"And what happened afterwards?"

"Nothing that I am aware of. I heard no further noise; and, though I continued my watch until day-break, I saw no one."

"May it not have been one of the servants, who, having absented himself without permission, was endeavouring to steal in unperceived?"

"We have not one on the establishment so tall."

"Remember, my dear Laura," said Mrs. Carlyon; "that fear exaggerates objects."

"I have no wish to deny it; but this was neither a lime-tree nor a servant."

"Had it been a burglar we should ere this have had evidence of his presence in the Castle;" suggested Marston.

"Unless," said Enna uneasily; "he has secreted himself somewhere to wait for a favourable opportunity. How do we know but that to-night he may admit some of his associates?"

"Although improbable, such is not alto-

gether impossible," replied Ferdinand. "In any case a rigorous search shall be made under my own direction ; only assure me that should this take place without producing any result, you will cease to alarm yourselves unnecessarily."

"We will do our best ;" said Laura ; "but I confess that my nerves are greatly shaken."

At this moment Adèle entered with some letters for her mistress.

"Adèle ——" commenced Mrs. Carlyon ; but at a gesture from Lady Ravenswood she paused.

"One moment, my dear Enna ;" said the Countess ; "let me read my letters before you give any instructions to Adèle, as they may contain something to alter our plans."

The *soubrette* curtsyed herself gracefully out of the room.

The whole interior of the Castle was searched under the auspices of Marston from vault to attic, but nothing was found which could account for the midnight apparition ; and "my lady's ghost" became a theme of banter in the servants' hall and in the waiting-rooms. Indeed, the mirth of Adèle was so excessive, that Martin could not restrain her

indignation, and threatened that, should she again detect the young lady in the act of mimicking the agitation of the Countess, she would have her summarily dismissed.

Among the letters delivered to Lady Ravenswood was one from the Earl to Marston, in which he informed him that the Queen, having ascertained that he had suffered a relapse, had again suggested his removal to another climate, and had graciously offered to his acceptance the post of unpaid *attaché* to the legation at Berlin, during the temporary absence of the gentleman then holding the appointment, who was anxious to visit England on urgent family affairs.

Lord Ravenswood had also mentioned the subject in his letter to his wife; and Enna had no sooner left the room to read undisturbed a despatch from Augustus, than the Countess said, with a resolute effort at composure; "so I find that Her Majesty is anxious to send you into exile, and to give you an opportunity of shining, 'a bright particular star,' upon the Prussian beauties. I do not doubt that you will make an excellent diplomatist."

"I fear not;" was the dejected reply; "I neither know how to dissemble or to mislead."

“ Oh ! ” said Laura, with an ill-suppressed bitterness which betrayed her uneasiness ; “ these things may be learnt. But it is really laughable to reflect how quietly crowned heads dispose of people, neither asking their own consent, nor that of their friends. Provided they imagine that they can make you useful, they stand upon no ceremony whatever, and send you a few hundred miles away from your home, without question or apology, until such time as it may please them to recall you. However, *we* are, fortunately, not living under a despotic sovereign ; and I warn you at once that I rebel against the royal will. Yes, I am very sorry for the fair ladies of Berlin, but you must not leave England.”

“ Pardon me ; ” was the low and measured reply : “ I shall gratefully accept the appointment.”

“ What ! ” exclaimed the Countess impetuously ; “ are you serious ? You have of late occasionally jested with so grave a face that I can no longer guess at your real meaning. Do you know that Lord Ravenswood will never consent to such a step ? ”

“ It is, however, imperative.”

“ Imperative ? And why ? Do you consider the danger to your health ? ”

“ Danger! Do we not constantly encounter it where we are supposed to be in safety? Do you consider fatigue, inconvenience, or even sickness, to be the only evil from which we should endeavour to escape? Why do you talk of danger to *me*, Lady Ravenswood? I, who am so thankful to save myself, at any cost, from that with which I am daily and hourly called upon to contend. Anywhere,—everywhere—I shall be more at peace than here.”

“ Ingrate!”

“ No; I will not accept the reproach. Could I lay bare my heart before you, you would see how little I deserve it.”

“ Why, then, do you talk of leaving England?”

“ Because I shrink at my own want of principle and moral courage; because I feel that I am sinking into a Sybarite, even while every nerve is strained to agony, and that every rumpled rose-leaf is a separate torture—because——”

“ You are mad, Ferdinand. I will accept no such insane and senseless reasons. Again I tell you, that you cannot leave England.”

“ Once more;” said Marston sadly, but

firmly; "let me declare that you deceive yourself; I must and ought to leave England, and that, too, without delay."

"But why?—why?" urged the Countess, losing all her self-possession.

"Why? Ah, Lady Ravenswood! Ah, Laura! do you ask me why?"

"I do: give me just cause to see that it is best for you to do so, and I shall no longer oppose ~~your~~ purpose; but now I confess that you disappoint as much as you surprise me. Who will love you better than Lord Ravenswood—than Enna—than—myself?" she concluded, almost inaudibly.

"It is precisely because I shall nowhere meet with the same affection and sympathy that I ought to remain here no longer."

"Ferdinand! Ferdinand! what do you mean?"

"You would know all, Laura? So be it. You shall be satisfied. *Why* should I go? Because I can no longer live under the same roof with *you*—because the very air that you breathe is dangerous to me—because a dark gulf yawns before me, which it may be death to cross, but into which it must be infamy to fall. Ah, you would know all, Laura! You

shall have my secret, since nothing less will convince you. I love you—love you as you can never again be loved—better than myself—better than my honour. You stand upon the pedestal of my heart, and all else is scattered in ashes about its base. You have become the very principle of my being,—*you*, the wife of my benefactor! Will you now urge me to remain in England?”

The Countess crouched down, and buried her face in her hands. She had not power to utter a syllable.

“Now,” continued Marston passionately; —“now call me ingrate, if you can. Prevent my departure, if you think that you have a right to do so. But you will not; no, I feel that you will not; you will rather hasten it; for you will do your duty, alike to yourself, to your husband, and to me. The very avowal which you have forced from me renders our separation inevitable. It is my sentence of exile,—my death-warrant, if you will—but it has been uttered, and must be expiated. With what feeling can I now expect you to regard me except one of contempt and indignation? I am self-convicted of the most wretched cowardice,—the blackest ingrati-

tude. Ah, Laura, would that you had left me to die before I had thus degraded myself in my own eyes as well as yours. While I live, it can only be to suffer, and I am unworthy of all pity; for even if I could not conquer my unhappy passion, I should at least have had principle enough to conceal it."

The Countess sat with her face still buried in her hands, weeping bitterly.

"Do you weep, Laura?" he continued; "Oh, wipe away your tears, every one of which falls on my soul like molten lead. Your grief is but another pang added to those that I am now compelled to bear. Reproach me — spurn me — but do not let me think that you pity me."

Still the Countess wept on.

"Oh, this is too much. My punishment is greater than I can bear!" exclaimed Marton; as, resolutely averting his eyes from the convulsed and drooping figure of Laura, he rushed from the room.

CHAPTER XX.

AN ALARM.

SEVERAL days passed before Lady Ravenswood and Ferdinand again met. The extreme agitation undergone by the former, during the scene described in the last chapter, had produced a low, nervous fever, by which she was rendered unable to leave her room; while Marston buried himself for hours in the depths of the plantations, where even the anxious search of Enna failed to discover him. The conviction that Laura shared his fault, instead of resenting it, filled him at times with a wild, delirious joy, and at others plunged him into the darkest depths of despair. The day-spring of their affection had changed to thick darkness; the sweet and soothing romance of their early love had degenerated into a guilty passion; the more guilty, that it was mutual. Even to him, who shared in the sin,

his heart's idol could never again be what she had been. What must he be to her?

Nothing—from henceforth, nothing. He had already wronged her sufficiently. He must no longer yield to the promptings of a diseased imagination; no longer prostrate himself at the feet of a false deity; no longer shrink from the self-sacrifice by which alone he could hope partially to repair the past.

Who shall say how strongly he wrestled with this conviction? Who shall say that he did not, in resolving to make such atonement as was still possible, palliate, if not actually redeem, his fault? It was the struggle of the strong man against himself; and the strong man's struggle is a moral earthquake.

Weak natures are capable of every extreme; and often accomplish, from sheer pusillanimity, actions from which the boldest and the firmest hearts would shrink appalled; while they, moreover, from their very cowardice, easily learn to become familiar with their own delinquencies. Powerless in present peril, they are careless of distant danger; and while profiting by the results of their turpitude, have an extraordinary facility of shutting their eyes to its ultimate consequences.

Such was not, however, the nature of Marston. That he had greatly erred, it is true ; but he had been in no small degree the victim of circumstances ; and although he had proved untrue to himself, it had been by no sudden and reckless impulse. The evil had grown up slowly and silently, until, like a noxious weed, it had gradually choked up and withered the more wholesome plants around it. Its root had struck deep into a strong soil ; and could be plucked thence by no feeble hand.

Marston felt that he had now but one alternative, and bitter as it was he accepted it. He wrote to the Earl, and informed him that after mature deliberation he had resolved to avail himself of the Queen's flattering and considerate offer ; hoping to show his fitness for the office which had been so graciously intrusted to him, his probation under Lord Ravenswood's auspices having familiarised him with many of its duties ; and concluded by the assurance that, should his guardian seek to dissuade him from profiting by so favourable an opportunity of securing a social position which must rescue him from the uselessness of the indolent existence which

he had long felt to be a reproach at his age, the disappointment would be very great.

“Leave England for a time, my dear Lord;” he said; “I must, or I shall never recover my health; and will it not be far better for me to do so in an honourable and responsible position than as a mere lounging traveller? Believe me when I say that I am most deeply grateful to Her Majesty for so signal a proof of her interest and indulgence; a gratitude which I shall endeavour to prove by my zeal and fidelity in her service.”

The letter was no sooner written than it was sealed and despatched to the post-town by a groom; and the Rubicon was passed.

Mrs. Carlyon, to whom he communicated his decision, did not attempt to conceal her satisfaction.

“I shall once more lose you, my dear Ferdinand, it is true;” she said affectionately; “but only, as I trust, to meet you again more like the brother of my girlhood. You have judged wisely and well in assuming responsibilities which will make a demand upon your mental as well as your physical strength. You will have less time to brood over your disappointment, and to nurse regrets which

are unworthy of you. I have firm faith in your rectitude of purpose, but it must have been unnecessarily tried while you remained here. Did Lord Ravenswood mention when you would be required to leave England?"

"Not precisely;" said Marston, sighing deeply; "but no doubt the sooner I can do so the better, as Mr. Vere is, it appears, anxious for the arrival of his successor."

"Did the Earl urge you to accept the appointment?"

"Quite the contrary, as you will see by his letter. He pleads his old objections as earnestly as ever; and will, I fear, be deeply hurt by my opposing his wishes."

"Console yourself by remembering that such would not be the case if he knew all;" replied Enna; "and by the conviction that you are following the path of duty and right principle."

"I need that consolation and that conviction;" said her brother; "and I trust that I shall derive strength from both; but I feel like a craven, escaping from a danger that he ought to brave and overcome, and I am ashamed of my own weakness."

"There is no real courage in creating

danger, Ferdinand, simply to gratify the poor vanity of setting it at defiance, or running the risk of becoming its victim. You have evinced more in not trusting, under existing circumstances, to your own strength."

"Has Lady Ravenswood conversed with you on the subject of my departure?"

"She has merely expressed her fear of the effect which this new separation may produce upon the Earl. Her first thought is naturally for him; but he gives so good a report of his health that he will of course feel it much less than he would have done had he still been an invalid. And now I will leave you, my dear Ferdinand, as I am anxious to let Augustus know how we are progressing here. I should not wonder if he were to propose a trip to Berlin as soon as you have established yourself; and you may rely on it that I shall not oppose him if he does so. I cannot tell you;" she pursued; "how much I regret that I was induced by Laura to accept Lady Wentworth's dinner-invitation for to-day, particularly as the distance is too great for me to return before so late an hour that I should run the risk of disturbing her, poor thing, and thus breaking her rest,—a consideration which

made me accept the offer of a bed at the Grange. I shall, however, return immediately after breakfast to-morrow morning, when I shall hope to find her much better, as she is now decidedly recovering."

"I regret it as much as you do, Enna;" said Marston gravely; "but as you have no valid excuse to offer on so short a notice, I suppose that you have no alternative. You will, however, only be absent a few hours, and the thing is consequently unimportant."

The remainder of the day passed wearily to Marston. He felt heart-sick and hopeless; and more than once he hesitated to decide whether he should not forthwith start for town, without again trusting himself to meet Laura. It would be better, as his reason told him, to do this; but the effort was beyond his strength. He *must* see her once more, were it only to beseech her pardon for his fault; to entreat of her henceforward to regard him with pity rather with blame; and to rely on his honour as implicitly as she had done before their last meeting. Soon, however, he became convinced, by the agitation which the thought alone of reverting to this subject produced upon him, that he must

not trust himself with words, for to what new error might they not lead when he was conscious that he should not be able to restrain his feelings, or to conceal the struggle which was going on within him? No; like the Spartan boy of old, he must endure in silence the gnawing of the pangs which were eating away his heart.

The morning-room of Lady Ravenswood was situated immediately above the apartment of Ferdinand. It was a delicious little octagonal retreat, with three windows commanding the most extensive and varied views over the park, and was gay with flowers, mirrors, choice old china, and richly-bound books. It was approached by a gallery opening upon the principal staircase; while a small door in one of its angles led to the *escalier de service* used by her attendants; and thence communicated with that by which she had seen the stranger enter some nights before.

The weather was sultry and oppressive; and heavy storm-clouds were gathering in the sky, when the Countess dismissed her women; and, throwing open one of the windows, stretched herself upon a sofa, to think, to weep, and to look as calmly as she might into

her own heart ; and hour after hour went by, and still she lay there. The night-lamp upon the dressing-table of her sleeping-room shedding a faint gleam through the half-opened door, and deepening the density of the surrounding shadows. How young and fair she looked, that poor, self-tortured girl ; pure, as though no taint of earth could ever touch her ; motionless, as though she had been hewn in marble ; and yet torn by conflicting feelings which racked her very soul.

Nor was she the only watcher through those hours of darkness. The gathering storm had a strange fascination for Marston, who, instead of seeking his bed, looked dreamily on the lurid vapours as they blotted out the stars ; and drew strange analogies between that shrouded heaven and his own fate.

“ The storm is bursting over us both ; ” he murmured to himself. “ How will it end ? In destruction, or in a newer and brighter day ? ”

As the question rose to his lips, the Castle-clock pealed out the hour of midnight ; and the vibration of the last stroke had scarcely died away, when a violent noise, which sounded as if caused by some heavy piece of furniture

flung to the floor in the room above his head, startled him from his reverie; and immediately afterwards the voice of the Countess reached him from the open window.

“What is the matter?” asked Ferdinand; “has anything alarmed you?”

“I am faint with terror. The stranger of last week has again entered the Castle.”

“Are you sure of this?”

“Perfectly; but I have not strength to talk to you from so great a distance. Come up-stairs, I entreat you; for as long as I am alone, I shall not be able to overcome my terror.”

Marston closed his window; caught up his pistols; and hastened to obey her summons.

CHAPTER XXI.

A COMPACT.

FERDINAND found the Countess pale, trembling, and suffering under the most intense alarm.

“Oh, you are come!” she exclaimed almost breathlessly; “for pity’s sake do not leave me.”

“Calm yourself;” said Marston; “or your excessive agitation may bring on a relapse of fever. I am armed, and quite able to protect you. But would it not be better, in the first place, for me to endeavour to find some trace of our nocturnal visitor?”

“Oh, no, no; I entreat you to make no such attempt. I cannot again be left alone,—I dare not; and, moreover, however well armed you may be, you cannot tell against how many you might have to contend,—for I agree with Enna, that the man has, in all probability, not ventured his undertaking,

whatever it may be, without taking the precaution to be accompanied by some of his confederates, and I will never consent to your running such a risk. If any danger threatens me personally, then, indeed, I will depend on you to protect me ; but should he prove to be a mere midnight robber, let him do his worst, as, by leaving him unmolested, no blood will be shed. Sit down, therefore, and let us await, as calmly as we can, the result of this unpleasant mystery."

"It is very repugnant to me to do so ;" said Marston ; "I could, at all events, if you would permit me to leave you for a few minutes, rouse some of the men-servants."

"But I tell you ;" persisted Laura ; "that I cannot—I will not—be left. I can bear no more ; and I am sure that my terror would kill me."

Ferdinand laid his pistols upon a table, and without any reply seated himself between her and the door.

"Hark !" she said suddenly ; "do you not hear a noise ?"

Marston listened attentively, but all was profoundly still.

"I thought ;" whispered the Countess

beneath her breath, "that I heard a door open upon the back staircase."

"And you say that it was by that staircase the man entered?"

"Yes; the outer door opens immediately under my window."

"Then I must really insist upon following up my first suggestion, and going in quest of the intruder."

"Do not persist, Ferdinand, I entreat;" said Laura appealingly; "I do not want any disturbance made in the Castle. My alarm, as I have already told you, has created a great deal of mirth among the servants; and as I cannot become the laughing-stock of my own menials without punishing those who are guilty of so much disrespect, should it again reach my ears, I wish to afford them no further opportunity of commenting upon my weakness."

"Nevertheless, these two midnight visits are so extraordinary, that I scarcely feel myself justified in yielding to such an argument, without seeking to ascertain their motive."

"Now that I am no longer alone;" said the Countess, making a sickly attempt to smile; "I am rapidly recovering my courage."

But even as she spoke, she glanced rapidly towards the two doors which opened into the room.

“Do you not think, however ;” she added, an instant afterwards ; “that I should do right to double-lock these doors ?”

“The precaution would be useless ;” replied Marston, smiling in his turn at the futility of her attempt to conceal her fears ; “for, assuredly, should any one venture to approach either of them, I would shoot him down.”

“Oh, no one will come here,—no one dare—” faltered out Laura, again sinking upon the sofa from which she had just risen.

“In that case, and if such is your conviction ;” said Ferdinand ; “I will retire to my room, but at the slightest sound, or the slightest signal, I will return.”

“As you please ;” was the bitter rejoinder ; “I cannot, of course, compel you to afford me your protection, or to interest yourself in my safety. My terror may perhaps, as you say, induce a return of my illness, or some catastrophe may occur before you have time to render me any assistance. However, I have no wish to detain you against your inclination.”

"You are unjust, Lady Ravenswood," said Ferdinand reproachfully.

"I am sure I do not mean to be so;" replied Laura, subdued in an instant by the tone and look of Marston; "but I am so terribly frightened."

"I thought that your reliance upon my help had restored your firmness."

"And so it had; but what will become of it if you abandon me?"

"Abandon you!" echoed her companion as if unconsciously.

"I am so powerless of myself;" she continued; "that I am compelled to lean on others for strength."

"And do you, indeed, lean trustingly on me, Laura?"

"I do;" was the faintly-uttered reply; "in all things."

The eyes of Marston dropped, and he sighed heavily.

"And yet;" he said, after the silence of a moment; "you are acquainted with the trite and worn-out truism which asserts that the tempest often strikes down the tall tree, and passes harmlessly over the sapling."

At this instant a vivid flash of lightning

lit up the whole expanse of the heavens, and was almost instantly succeeded by a peal of thunder which crashed and crackled above their heads, finally dying away in hoarse murmurs among the distant hills.

The Countess buried her face in the cushions of the sofa, and uttered a faint scream.

An impetuous gale of wind succeeded, unaccompanied by a drop of rain ; the branches of the forest-timber creaked and groaned as they resisted the hurrying blasts ; and the shrubs bent to the earth beneath their weight. Then came another flash, fierce and forked, which played for an instant about the room, leaping from one metallic object to another, and diffusing a lurid glare on all around.

With the peal which followed, a fiery bolt fell, and buried itself in the lawn not fifty yards from the house ; and then came a sudden lull even more awful than the previous tempest ; and amid the deep stillness Marston approached the Countess. " Laura," he whispered ; " do not fear ; I will not leave you now, when you have tangible cause for alarm. This is a fearful moment ; let us use it as though it had been sent in mercy to warn us against the moral

strife to which we have both too easily yielded. You see that I affect no false delicacy ; gladly as I would believe that I deceive myself in the conviction that I am even dearer to you than a friend, I cannot ; gladly as I would cease to regard you in any other light, I am equally powerless ; let us, then, accept our fate without embittering it ; let us mutually bear our burthen without increasing its weight ; we may be unable to master our feelings, but it is in our power to control our actions. I loved you long, Laura, without one taint of passion, and then, indeed, I was worthy of you ; but now I am no longer so. Do not, however, cast me utterly from you ; let me strive to be once more what I was, and aid me in the struggle. You are the wife of my guardian, and he has been to me alike a father and a benefactor. Let each of us remember this, and perhaps the day may yet come when we shall be enabled to meet without a blush or a pang."

" I promise all — everything —" murmured Laura, extending her hand, but without raising her head ; " provided you will not leave England."

Another fearful flash, another tremendous

peal, and the heavy rain descended like a torrent from the heavens.

“Our mutual expiation must commence at once;” said Marston, solemnly and firmly; “I must go!”

The Countess shivered, but remained silent.

“Let us endeavour to forget the past;” pursued Ferdinand, still holding fast her trembling hand in his; “and let us henceforth each look upon the other as a dear relative, whose happiness and honour are a portion of our own existence. It will be hard to do this, I know; but it must be done.”

“Abandon me then to my sorrow, if you will;” exclaimed Lady Ravenswood, raising herself with sudden energy to a sitting posture and fixing her eyes steadily upon him; “but one act of justice you must perform before we part. You well know that if I, indeed, loved you before I became the wife of another, my love was not unsought; that if I gave my hand to another, it was because you suddenly threw back upon me the affection which you once affected to value so highly; that it was in utter recklessness of the future that I suffered myself to be made the tool of my mother’s ambition; nor can you have for-

gotten that it was you, and you only, who taught her how it might be gratified, and urged her to sacrifice *me* in order to effect her purpose."

"Laura, be merciful!"

"I am desperate!" was the passionate reply. "What have I not been compelled to endure? The cup of happiness was raised to my lips, and then dashed away by the very hand that offered it. I was coldly cast aside like a worthless plaything, when I had given up my whole heart to its first trust and hope. I was taught the bitter lesson of deceit and perjury; and I am now—not what I sought to be and would have been—but what the will of others has made me. Now, therefore, I appeal to your honour; I appeal to your justice; and I demand to know why my life has been thus blighted?—why, having gained my affections, you slighted them?—why, not satisfied with inflicting upon me this first great wrong, you afterwards made yourself the arbiter of my fate, and coldly sold me to an existence of deceit and wretchedness? These are questions to which I claim an answer; nor can you deny that I have a right to exact it."

"You have;" replied Marston gloomily;

"and yet I must once more submit to appear both unjust and dishonourable in your eyes, for I am compelled to withhold the reply you seek."

"And yet you affect to love me!"

"Affect, Laura!" exclaimed the agonised young man; "Oh, do not doubt even my love. Had the secret of my unhappy conduct been my own, you should not have waited until to-night for an explanation of its cause; but the honour of one, whom I am bound by every tie of duty and principle to protect, depends upon my silence. I have long seen and felt how despicable, how pitiful, I must appear in your eyes; and yet I dare not vindicate myself."

"Am I to understand;" asked Lady Ravenswood haughtily; "that it is the honour of my husband which is confided to your keeping? That would, indeed, be the last drop in my draught of bitterness."

"The honour of Lord Ravenswood is in no man's keeping," said Marston.

"Then how did my destiny become involved with that of one who must be a stranger to me? What is this mystery? It would be less cruel were you honestly to

confess at once that you had ceased to care for me, and therefore speculated upon my wealth to regild the coronet of your guardian."

Ferdinand dropped the hand which he had hitherto held; the blood forsook his cheeks, and his lips quivered spasmodically. He was heart-wrung.

"Forgive me;" faintly murmured the Countess as she remarked his emotion; "you must—you will—forgive me—for I am very, very wretched;" and again the little hand was stretched forth.

"Laura;" almost hissed out her companion, in a tone that made her start; "do you remember the night of the ball, when I was closeted with your mother? Do you remember the words which passed between us at the commencement of that evening, and the way in which we parted? Can you have forgotten that I attributed my subsequent wretchedness to illness, and made that a plea to escape from the torture of witnessing your marriage? That I persisted in remaining abroad, because I feared to trust myself in your society, until I could no longer resist the importunities of your husband for my return? Miserable and heart-broken as I

was, Laura, I had resolved to endure to the end rather than feel myself unworthy of the generous affection and trust of my second father. But this was not to be. Once more I found myself beneath his roof,—beside you ; daily and hourly exposed to the fascinations against which I was powerless to contend. I wrung my very soul in order to affect a coldness which not only tortured me, but, as I could not fail to see, also wounded you ; and then came my unhappy—” he suddenly paused, while the Countess listened eagerly—“ my unhappy accident ;” he hurriedly resumed,—“ of which the most dangerous results to me were your care, your tenderness, and your sympathy. But still I strove, although less earnestly perhaps, to look upon you only as a dear sister, and to persuade myself that I had mistaken your feelings towards me. I asked myself how, had you really loved me, you could have so readily given yourself to the Earl ? or how it was possible, when you had once become his wife, for you to remain insensible to his worth ? But then, Laura, came that fatal scene under the sycamore, and I could doubt no longer. You *did* love me ; and you know how cowardly an advantage I

took of that knowledge during our last interview. Pity and pardon me now, for I will never again recur to this subject. All that I ask of you is, not to blaspheme a love which I shall carry with me to my grave, as at once the torture and the charm of my existence."

"I will believe you;" said Lady Ravenswood; "I will, I *must*, believe that we have both been made the sport of circumstances, or I could never again have faith in human nature. But surely, Ferdinand, we need not, because our first and brightest dream of happiness is at an end, voluntarily resign that which still remains to us. Be to me a brother; and I will learn to look upon you only as such. We will bury our secret deep in our hearts, and never even indulge in the luxury of one allusion to it. By your remaining near us, Lord Ravenswood will be spared the pain of a separation on which, in his last letter to me, he dwells with all the regret of a father; while we shall see each other, share in each other's cares and joys, and find a compensation for all the wear and weariness of the world in the peaceful happiness of home. This is all I ask, and this you may in all honour concede, for there can be no blame attached to so pure

and blameless an affection ; and one, moreover, fostered and encouraged by my husband."

" Did I dare to hope ;" commenced Marston, with a fluttering at the heart which should have warned him of the fallacy of such an expectation ; " oh, Laura, did I, indeed, dare to hope that this could ever be, I would repine against my fate no longer."

" And why should it not be?" was the earnest rejoinder ; " it can, and will be. And to convince you that I shall redeem my pledge, I promise to ask no further question as to the nature of your secret ; while you must be equally generous on your side, and abandon all project of playing the diplomatist at Berlin."

" But I have already written to the Earl to authorise him to inform the Queen that I accept the offered appointment."

" Do not send the letter."

" It is beyond recall. It has been gone many hours ; and the act is now irrevocable."

" By no means, Write again, and revoke your decision. Lord Ravenswood will be only too much rejoiced to find some valid

reason which will liberate you from your promise."

"But what must he himself think of my unpardonable vacillation?"

"He will think that you have yielded to his wishes, and will be grateful to you for the concession."

At that moment the rain ceased; and as the scud drifted across the sky, the calm, sweet moon looked down, pure and sad, as though she mourned over the devastation created by the spent storm.

And the self-constituted brother and sister sat in silence, gazing out upon the silent beauty of the scene, themselves as silent and as motionless; sat, with their hands locked in each other, lost in vague hopes and apprehensions, which neither cared to confess.

One o'clock struck.

"Will you obey me, Ferdinand?" murmured a low, soft voice in the ear of Marston.

"I will."

"Leave me, then; I am too happy now to fear. Go, and endeavour to get some rest."

Marston rose; but, as he did so, he

caught the sound of some unusual confusion in the lower part of the house ; and he had not time to retreat to his own room, before hasty footsteps were ascending the principal staircase. Lady Ravenswood grasped his arm.

“ Do not leave me now ; ” she said tremblingly ; “ or I am lost.”

Ferdinand replied only by seizing his pistols, and shaking off her hold.

• “ Laura, my love, are you awake ? ” asked the voice of her mother, as she tapped gently at the door.

“ Make no reply ; ” whispered Ferdinand quickly but quietly lowering the night-bolt ; “ should any one enter, you will be compromised for ever.”

“ But when I explain why you are here ? ”

“ No one will give you credit. They will say that had your tale been true, you would have summoned your women.”

Laura bowed her head in silence.

“ Do not let us disturb her, Martin ; she was, no doubt, alarmed and worn out by the storm ; ” were the next words which reached the agitated pair within the chamber ; “ and it is now so late, or rather so early, that we shall soon meet.”

"I do not think that my lady was frightened, my Lady Baroness;" was the reply; "for she did not ring her bell. I thought once, more than an hour ago, that I heard a noise in her room; but although I listened anxiously for some time afterwards, all was quite still; so I suppose that I was mistaken."

"Does she always bolt the door of her dressing-room?" inquired her mother, after having vainly endeavoured to open it.

"Not always, my lady; but she does so sometimes, when she does not wish to be awoke too soon."

"Well, show me to my room, Martin, for I am wretchedly tired; and you will not, I should think, be sorry to return to your bed."

"Her room is opposite to this;" gasped out the Countess. "What is to become of us?"

"I must wait here until she has dismissed Martin, and fastened herself in;" replied Marston soothingly; "do not terrify yourself. A little patience, and all will go well, my sweet sister; but," he added, in a tone of relief; "I can escape by the back staircase. Had I done so in the first instance, I should have been already safe in my own room."

"Do not be so rash!" exclaimed Laura, clinging to him.

"I will remain here no longer;" persisted Marston; "it might cost you your reputation."

"And you, madman? Should you meet the man who is secreted somewhere in the Castle, it may cost you your life;" retorted the Countess.

"I am armed."

"I care not. You shall not brave an almost certain death for me."

"Nay; this is weakness;" said Ferdinand.

"Perhaps so. Call it what you will; but you shall not pass that door."

"Did you not, Laura, just before the arrival of your mother, yourself desire me to leave you?"

"I did; but you cannot do so now, for even if you should be able to evade the dagger of an assassin, you would be overheard by my women, who must have been awakened by the arrival of my mother."

"I yield;" said Marston gloomily; "but hark!" and with one bound he traversed the room, flung open the prohibited door, and disappeared in the darkness; while Lady Ravenswood, unable either to utter a word, or

to move a limb, stood with distended eyes and parted lips on the spot where he had left her.

In a few seconds he was once more at her side.

"The mystery is solved;" he said soothingly; "calm yourself. The midnight intruder is Mr. Willoughby, whom I recognised by the light of a small taper carried by Adèle. Have you any reason to suspect her fidelity? I have reasons of my own for making this inquiry."

"I scarcely know how to answer;" was the almost inarticulate reply.

"This matter must be investigated;" continued Ferdinand. "A gentleman does not steal by night into the house of a relative for any honest purpose; and we must be doubly careful, Laura, now we have reason to suspect that you are harbouring a spy among your personal attendants."

"A spy!" echoed Lady Ravenswood; "upon whom and what?"

Marston did not immediately reply. An instant conviction had grown upon him that the active and officious Frenchwoman, whose restless eye and stealthy step had often irritated him beyond endurance during his period of

convalescence, was in the confidence, and probably in the pay, of Arthur Willoughby, who had, as he was well aware, threatened, even when he himself lay apparently dying at his feet, that, should he survive their meeting, he would find an opportunity of revenge. And then his thoughts flew back to the scene under the sycamore,—to his own mad avowal of his passion for the Countess,—and what might not Adèle have both seen and overheard ?

A more vulgar mind than that of Marston might have attributed the nocturnal intrusion of Laura's cousin to another, and an equally unworthy motive ; but, essentially a gentleman in feeling and conduct, he could not realise the idea that any man of honour could degrade himself by carrying on a low intrigue with a menial under the roof of a female relation.

The human heart is a strange casuist ; but did not an inward voice accuse him in his turn, as he refused to admit the possibility of this social degradation in another, that he had been equally guilty, although in a manner less repugnant to his own tastes ?

At length all was still in the Castle ; and,

drawing off his boots, Marston stole cautiously down stairs.

On the following morning, Adèle, greatly to her surprise and indignation, was dismissed.

CHAPTER XXII.

DISCORD.

Mrs. CARLYON learnt with a regret which she made no effort to conceal, her brother's change of purpose. Not suspecting for a moment that Laura and Ferdinand had met during her absence, she found it impossible to account for his apparently inconsistent conduct; while the newly-created Baroness, on the contrary, congratulated him on his decision, declaring that, for real comfort, there was no country like England, and that whenever he might wish to change the scene for a time, he could always command a hearty welcome at Schloss Hartheim. It was fortunate for Lady Ravenswood that the return of her mother afforded a ready reason for her rapidly restored health and amended spirits, or the suspicions of Enna must have been inevitably aroused; as it was, however, nothing could

appear more natural. She had gained her point ; Marston would remain in England ; and this single fact sufficed to restore peace and gladness to her heart. She had veiled the edge of the precipice with flowers, and she resolutely refused to look down into the depth beneath it.

What could be more simple, more natural, or even more commendable, than the compact into which she had entered with Ferdinand ? What could she desire more than to enjoy his society, to listen to his voice, to share his pursuits ;—To be to him, in short, as a sister ; triumphing in his triumphs, sorrowing for his cares, and dividing between him and her husband her affection, her solicitude, and her pride ?

Did Marston see more clearly into his own heart ? It is probable that he did ; but he had succumbed again because he had lost all confidence in the stability of his own resolves ; and that he found in the impossible scheme proposed by Laura a fascination which he had not at the moment power to resist. Be this as it may, however, it is at least certain that he determined strictly to adhere to the rule which they had mutually laid down ; and,

consequently, the very idea of Berlin became doubly odious to him. He, who had once considered his plighted word as binding as a bond, now held it lightly, and only congratulated himself that it could be recalled. Laura was the wife of another, it is true; but that other had never possessed her heart, and therefore he did him no wrong in maintaining a place there.

No wrong! Ah, Marston, could you, or would you, only have looked back into your own heart ere you had thus taught it to temporise with evil, you must have shrunk appalled. No wrong! when for the gratification of your weak selfishness, you coldly and deliberately made a dupe of the guardian of your boyhood and the friend of your youth? When you were pitilessly destroying every hope that he might one day, by his unwearying devotion and gentle virtues, compel an affection which he so richly merited? Was such sophistry worthy of one who had entered upon life full of high and holy impulses, and who would have spurned from him his dearest friend, had he ventured to assert that he could one day be so fallen?

The arrival of the *ci-devant* Mrs. Heathcote

was eagerly seized by Laura as a pretext for once more gathering her friends about her. She had been repeatedly urged to do this by the Earl, but had always pleaded the weak state of Marston's health as a reason for declining. Until he had rent asunder the veil which passion had spread before her eyes, she was jealous of his every look and word, and could scarcely brook to share them even with his sister and Carlyon; but now, when, as she tried to believe, her moral power over him was established, and that she had learnt how deeply she had wronged him by entertaining a doubt of his sincerity, and losing faith in his truth, a weight was lifted from her heart, and she began to value existence as she had not done for many weary months. Still there were many moments in which both Lady Ravenswood and Marston would fain have escaped from the perpetual round of gaiety in which they were suddenly involved; but they suffered no sign of this distaste to become evident. Both were conscious that, had they been heart-free, they should have participated as fully in the festivities about them as their friends; and, anxious not to provoke the comments of the curious, they submitted to the

irksomeness and fatigues of this enforced gaiety, with a ready grace which robbed it of half its tedium. Occasionally, too, as they crossed and recrossed each other in the dance, they exchanged a look, a slight pressure of the hand, or a few low-breathed words, insignificant to others, but full of meaning to themselves. Still, however, Ferdinand delayed sending the letter which was to release him, as he fondly imagined, from the necessity of fulfilling his diplomatic engagement. A certain inward consciousness of ingratitude towards his sovereign, and of disrespect towards his guardian, who might resent an instability of purpose which could not fail to place him in an onerous position, constantly restrained his pen; and this hesitation, which was daily increasing the difficulty of the situation, became at length a fixed feeling which he gradually ceased to combat; and thus—how unlike his former self!—he suffered the frivolities of the hour and the fallacies of his own heart to absorb him entirely, to the exclusion of all other and more serious considerations.

Laura, meanwhile, fully believing that what she had so resolutely willed, had been already accomplished, asked no further questions upon

the subject; and lived on as though there existed nothing in the world beyond the circle of which she was the presiding deity.

Seldom do the gay and the happy, as they sport under the glad sunshine, pause to watch the storm-cloud which is gathering above their heads; Lady Ravenswood flattered herself that her trials were at length over, and that henceforward her life was to be one long dream of peace and affection.

Pretexting an indignation which he was far from feeling, at the refusal of the Countess to receive the proffered visit of his mother, Captain Willoughby did not again make his appearance at the Castle in order to complete his own. Aware of the abrupt dismissal of his confederate, and conscious that it was attributable to his agency; as well as alive to the impossibility of residing under the same roof with the man he had so deeply injured, and whom he still hated with undiminished bitterness, he affected to resent what he professed to consider as an insult to his family, while he, in truth, rejoiced over the plausible motive thus afforded to him to absent himself.

The mortification of Lady Willoughby was

more sincere. She had deluded herself into a firm conviction that her presence and support were essential to the Countess, whose youth and inexperience rendered her, in her eyes, totally incapable of presiding over a large establishment ; or of supporting, in a becoming manner, the dignity of the name she bore ; and she expatiated volubly to the patient Rachel, who was even more mortified than herself, on the ingratitude of Lady Ravenswood ; who, after she had exerted herself to place her in her proper position in the county, and to replace the absent mother—who had seen fit to abandon her at such a time, in order to secure an opportunity of committing the most egregious act of folly of which a woman of her age could be guilty—now thought proper to decline her visit, when she had even confidentially explained to her that it might subserve the interests of Sir Marmaduke's niece. The worthy lady was, at this precise time, peculiarly irascible ; as, in the letter by which Laura decidedly but courteously, and with many acknowledgments of her intended kindness, had declared her intention of receiving no resident guests at the Castle during the absence of the Earl, she had

also considered it expedient to inform her of the reasons which had detained Mrs. Heathcote at Vienna, and of her accession to her new title.

"The fact is ;" said the irate recipient, of this most unlooked-for information, as she closed the letter, and threw it contemptuously from her ; "that Arabella's head was turned by the absurd marriage of her upstart daughter ; and nothing, it seems, would afterwards satisfy her but a nickname of her own. Baroness von Hartheim, indeed ! A beggarly substitution for an honest name, purchased for a few pounds, and which will make her the laughing-stock of all her acquaintance. I really pity her, poor thing, if she could discover no better method of forcing her way among the lords and ladies of whom she is so fond. However, of one fact I can assure her, and that is, that I totally disapprove of Laura residing, during the absence of her husband, under the same roof with so young and good-looking a man as Ferdinand Marston. The Earl must be as mad as my sister."

Arthur, who was lounging upon a sofa, rustling the pages of a sporting paper, and watching with considerable amusement both

the irritation of his mother, and the discomfiture of his cousin, here indulged in a low chuckling laugh which jarred on his mother's already excited nerves.

"I really do not understand;" she said angrily; "what you can find to amuse you in circumstances by which I am so seriously annoyed. I did think, Arthur, when you first heard how shamefully I had been treated, that you resented the affront as much as I did."

"And so I did, and still do;" was the reply; "but I confess that I *am* amused to discover that even your penetration, upon which I believe you pride yourself, is completely at fault on this occasion. Of course Lady Ravenswood prefers to nurse her interesting invalid without being intruded on by others, who, as I have reason to know, would be very considerably in the way of both."

"I thought;" ventured Rachel Cleveland; "that Mr. Marston's sister and brother-in-law were at the Castle."

"And what then?" asked Willoughby with a civil sneer; "do you imagine that new-married people are in the habit of passing their honeymoon in a sick-room? As for me, I should in any case have hesitated to

break up so charming a party ; and my mother has had a tolerably strong proof that she will not be permitted to do so."

"I declare!" exclaimed the lady ; "if I thought that you had a single reason for what you say I would write and warn the Earl."

"It strikes me that you could not do better;" yawned Arthur with affected indifference, as he rose and stretched himself.

"And I am convinced that you could not do worse;" grumbled Sir Marmaduke from the depths of his easy chair ; "unless, indeed, you wish to break off all connexion with your sister's family. The Earl is not a person to brook the insult of such a suspicion ; while as to Marston, he has already proved, as Arthur well knows, that he is quite able and willing to defend himself."

The young man, thus abruptly appealed to, gave a slight start, but instantly recovered his usual self-possession.

"Ah, yes ;" he said carelessly, as he caught up his military cap from the chair on which he had flung it when he entered ; "you allude to the stupid quarrel, or whatever it was, where he got winged. He made but a poor business of that, however, in my opinion ; and it is to

be hoped that it will be a warning to him for the future."

"And to his adversary also, I trust;" was the stern rejoinder of the Baronet, as he kept his eyes steadily fixed upon his son, full of an expression which was the reverse of agreeable to that estimable personage; "for the wretched man who provoked that quarrel narrowly escaped the crime of murder."

"Not according to the code of honour, or the opinion of those persons who are competent to decide the question;" was the sullen retort.

"Sir!" hissed the old gentleman, partially rising from his seat; "is it to me that you dare venture such a remark,—to me, whose long military career has been ever considered one of unblemished integrity and unshrinking courage? To me, who bear about me the scars of wounds more honourably gained than in midnight brawls and in senseless quarrels, where a man is only called upon to make a target of his fellow-man, and to serve for one in his turn? I, sir, did not enter the army a ruined gamester, an incorrigible profligate, only to indulge my vices under cover of the most ennobling garb a man can wear, and

thus to disgrace it. Have a care, sir,—have a care—or you may not be long in a position to insult your own father.”

“ My dear Sir Marmaduke ;” interposed his wife deprecatingly—“ how can you imagine for a moment that Arthur had any intention of wounding you? He is as well aware as you can be ——”

“ That such sentiments come ill from him ;” broke in the Baronet in his turn. “ If he supposes that I am not as well aware as himself of the life that he is now leading, and much more so of its inevitable results, he strangely deceives himself ; for I have made myself better acquainted with some of his recent *honourable* doings than he probably suspects ; and again I say, Lady Willoughby, that unless you desire a total rupture with your family, you will be careful how you suffer yourself to listen to his selfish and senseless suggestions.”

“ Upon my word, sir — ” commenced Arthur.

“ *Your* word !” said Sir Marmaduke, with a saddened contempt painful to witness in a father ; “ what is it worth? Who would accept such a pledge? Do not talk to me of

either your word or your honour; for you have already so often forfeited both, that both are alike worthless. Oh, Arthur, Arthur!" piteously continued the old man, as he swept his hand across his forehead, and thrust back the grey locks that clung about it; "child of my old age, who should have proved the stay and solace of my few remaining years of life—the pride and hope of my ancient house—what are you to me, save a fear and a reproach? I see nothing before me but struggle, discord, and disgrace; nothing after me but a ruined inheritance and a dishonoured name."

Little did Lady Ravenswood suspect, when she replied to the letter of her aunt to decline her presence at the Castle, to how painful a family scene so simple an occurrence would give rise; while she was equally unable to foresee that she should be indebted to the firmness of the stern old general for her escape from the foul slander which was about to be brought upon her name.

The effect produced upon the mind of Arthur Willoughby by the reproaches of his father, well calculated as they were to check him in his wild and vicious career, unfortunately produced an entirely opposite result.

So long as he had flattered himself that Sir Marmaduke was ignorant of the extent of his delinquencies, as well as unsuspecting of his share in the misfortune of Marston, he had acted with some degree of caution ; but the restraint once removed by his belief that the secret of the duel had been betrayed by the ex-sergeant, and that the Baronet was, in truth, fully cognisant of all his dissolute and immoral practices, than, after having vowed an undying vengeance, both against Ferdinand and the veteran, he plunged headlong into the wildest excesses ; and was finally dismissed the service for striking the colonel of his regiment while in a state of intoxication ; the latter having, at the united entreaties of all his brother officers, declined to ask at his hands the satisfaction which he would have demanded from a man of honour.

This was the last intelligence which Lady Willoughby ever received of her model son ; save, indeed, that he had drawn a check on the bankers of Sir Marmaduke, purporting to be signed by his father ; and had embarked for California.

On ascertaining this last act of turpitude, the old gentleman made no remark which

could excite the suspicions of the Messrs. — ; but, in reply to the passionate appeals of his wife, he coldly commanded that the name of Arthur Willoughby should never again be mentioned in his presence.

Once, and only once, was this order disobeyed ; and that was by a stranger, who requested a private interview with the Baronet on business of importance. The interview was granted ; and after a separation of three years, Sir Marmaduke learned that his son had fallen a victim to the vengeance of a brother-exile, whose sister he had dishonoured and abandoned. Alone, and on his knees, the aged man passed the night which succeeded this awful intelligence. His pride was crushed to the earth. His self-respect was prostrated ; and although he kept, what to his last hour he looked upon as his disgrace, closely locked within his own breast, he never again asserted himself as he had once done, but sunk into a species of apathy, which many attributed to age ; the companions of his manhood, to the effects of wounds and over-exertion during his long period of military service ; and his wife, to the undue severity with which he had driven Arthur to a life of exile.

One thing is certain ; that whatever might have been the projects of revenge nourished by the wretched young man, when the death of his father should have enabled him to return to England, and “to claim his inheritance,” they were buried for ever in the grave ; and what a grave ! Sullied by blood, dug by the hands of strangers, and lost amid a hundred others as rude, as unhallowed, and as ignoble.

CHAPTER XXIII.

A REVELATION.

LADY RAVENSWOOD and her adopted brother, however resolutely they maintained the letter of their compact, failed grievously in its spirit. During all the brief and uncertain intervals of uninterrupted communion which they could command in the absence of their companions, they avoided talking of either the past or the future, and dwelt only upon the present. Not a word relative to their mutual attachment was uttered ; but questions were asked and answered on both sides, which tended imperceptibly to endear them the more to each other.

On one of these occasions Marston was betrayed into revealing to Laura the fatal secret which had determined his whole after-fate ; and could anything have reconciled him to the suffering which had supervened, it

would assuredly have been the intense look of admiration which she turned upon him through the tears that were raining down her cheeks.

"I need not ask you;" he said; "to guard my secret as religiously as I have myself done; for should this circumstance ever reach the ears of Enna it would crush her proud spirit to the earth; and one victim must suffice. She is happy now, poor girl! in her ignorance of the blight which has fallen upon our name; and thus would I have her remain. As for myself, as I shall never marry, I shall not perpetuate the disgrace, which will, I trust, be buried and forgotten in my grave."

The cheek of the Countess flushed crimson, and a smile played about her lips: "Never, Ferdinand?" she whispered interrogatively.

"Never!"

Then succeeded a silence more eloquent than words. Each read the other's heart, and they feared to trust themselves with words. It was a dangerous pause, but it was happily broken. A distant sound of wheels came through the open windows, and in a few seconds a travelling chaise, drawn by four

horses, which they instantly recognised as that of the Earl, stopped before the door.

As, by an instinctive impulse, Laura extended her hand towards him, Marston sprang to his feet and turned away. All the self-reproach, all the sense of his great error, which he had succeeded in crushing back during the absence of his benefactor, rushed over his soul at once. How should he dare to meet his eye? And he was already here,—already awaiting his embrace! There was no escape,—none. A film seemed to pass before his eyes; his heart throbbed almost to suffocation; a cold, clammy dew started upon his forehead; and his face turned ashy white.

“Ferdinand! — brother ——” faltered the Countess.

“Hush, Laura; not a word!” said Marston deprecatingly; “we have deceived ourselves,—we have deceived *him*—and now we have only to meet our trial as best we may.”

Little did Lord Ravenswood suspect the effect which would be produced by his unexpected arrival at his home. He had purposely omitted to announce it, fondly believing that he should give an agreeable surprise to those from whom he had been so long sepa-

rated ; and it was consequently with a glad heart that he folded, first his wife, and then his ward, in his arms, and overwhelmed them with affectionate endearments.

The Countess evinced considerably more self-possession than Marston, whose agitation was too great for concealment ; he knew and felt the full extent of the error of which he had been guilty ; while Laura, relying on their mutual understanding, almost induced herself to believe that they had converted what, under other circumstances, might have been a sin, into a blameless and praiseworthy feeling, of which her husband himself could not but approve ; while she, moreover, dwelt with complacency upon the conviction that the original error into which she had fallen had been induced by the selfish tyranny of her mother, and the peculiar position in which she had been placed. The composure of Lady Ravenswood grew, in short, out of the fact that she had never thoroughly comprehended her danger ; and that she was anxious, now that she looked upon it as past, to blot it altogether from her memory.

Still, the sight of the confiding and generous man who had so unhesitatingly trusted to her good faith and purity of character, did not

fail to produce a marked effect upon her ; and as she listened to his self-gratulation at his return, and his assurances of the impatience with which he had looked forward to this happy reunion with his family, her heart smote her, for she was conscious of no such joy,—of no such yearnings—but rather of a dull, heavy aching at her heart, an intolerable void which could never again be filled up.

Fortunately for Marston, the Earl attributed his incoherency and his excessive emotion to his still precarious state of health, and tenderly reproached himself for want of caution in having unnecessarily exposed his beloved ward to an agitation which a little prudence on his part might have prevented ; while Ferdinand, who would once have disdained all subterfuge as an acted falsehood, accepted without comment this explanation of his conduct, and even forced a smile as he declared that he should soon overcome a weakness of which he felt ashamed.

“ And now, my dear children ; ” said Lord Ravenswood ; “ I believe that I shall be idle enough to ask you to offer my kind regards to our guests on their return from their drive, as I feel much fatigued by my journey. To-

morrow I shall have news for you ; but to-night I am not equal to any further excitement, nor would I inflict it upon our invalid. I will, therefore, go to my room, as I have some papers to arrange which will require all my attention."

"Will you not allow me to assist you, my dear lord?" asked Marston eagerly; "it will be to me like a renewal of old times."

"No, my boy;" replied Lord Ravenswood, as he leant his hand affectionately on the shoulder of Ferdinand, and rose from his seat; "to-night I must be alone. In the morning I shall be prepared to find some employment for your pen."

As he disappeared, Marston sank into a chair, and a long groan of agony burst from his overcharged bosom.

"Ferdinand;" whispered the Countess, as she bent over him; "this is cruel,—cruel to yourself, and doubly cruel to me. Is this the way in which you would prove to me that I am to look to you for the support of a brother's affection? I ask no more,—I seek no more—and surely this is not much for you to grant."

Marston shook his head sadly.

"I cannot deceive myself as you do, Laura;" he said; "the very sight of the Earl has convinced me of the fallacy of such a hope."

"But you will keep your promise ——"

"I will, cost me what it may. The die is cast; I have become reckless of the future for myself, but I no longer retain the right to withdraw my plighted word to you."

Lady Ravenswood asked no more; and fully convinced that Ferdinand had already an understanding on this subject with the Earl, although neither had alluded to it when they met, she turned the conversation into another channel; and although it was but languidly carried on by both, it yet sufficed to help them through the hour which elapsed before the return of Mr. and Mrs. Carlyon and the Baroness.

The surprise of the little party on learning the unexpected advent of their host was great, and a deluge of questions was poured forth, to very few of which either the Countess or Marston was able to reply. That the Earl was considerably improved in health satisfied the affectionate anxiety of Enna; while Carlyon was eager in his political inquiries, and Ma-

dame von Hartheim was curious to learn all the movements of the Court.

Who among us, with a heart and mind preoccupied by some overpowering interest, or laden with some hidden sorrow, has not at one period or another undergone the moral torture of such a trial as this? Laura and Ferdinand had so much to say to each other; so much that each felt should have been said, and which neither had dared to utter, that those unspoken words, that unfulfilled duty, pressed upon them like a leaden weight, while they were compelled to listen, to reply, and even to smile at the sallies of their companions.

At length the evening drew to a close; and as the ladies had thoroughly wearied themselves by a long drive over the hills, they retired early; and before midnight all was still in the Castle. All still?—All, save the labouring hearts which were never again to know peace.

On the following morning, after the general meeting had taken place at breakfast, and the Earl, with his accustomed urbanity and indulgence, had satisfied, in so far as it was in his power to do so, the curiosity of his questioners, he withdrew to his wife's morning-room,

requesting the Countess and Marston to accompany him ; and Lady Ravenswood had no sooner established herself at her tapestry-frame, than with an unusually grave and thoughtful expression of countenance, he seated himself beside her, motioning to Ferdinand to take possession of a chair on his other hand.

There was no mistaking the fact that he was about to communicate to them something of importance ; and the agitation of Laura became so excessive as she saw her husband withdraw a packet of papers from his pocket, and deposit them on the table, that she half rose, and asked hurriedly :—

“ Had I not better leave you alone together as you have business to transact ? ”

“ By no means, my love ; ” said Lord Ravenswood ; “ it is, on the contrary, essential that you should hear what I am about to disclose to Ferdinand. My dear boy ; ” he continued, turning to the latter ; “ I received at Balmoral the letter in which you informed me of your determination to accept the appointment so graciously offered to you by Her Majesty ; and you must forgive me if I confess that I felt deeply disappointed on finding that you declined to accede to my wishes, by re-

maining in England. I am an old man, Ferdinand, and the fear that we might never meet again made a coward of me. However ——”

“Pardon me for interrupting you, my lord;” interposed Marston, as he met the appealing look of the Countess; “and do not despise me for my vacillation of purpose, if I own to you that I wrote without due reflection, and without sufficiently estimating the value of your affectionate advice. I have now entirely abandoned all idea of going to Berlin; and the first wish of my heart is never again to part from you while we both live. Weakened by illness, I yearned for some excitement which should enable me to throw off the apathy that was gaining upon me; but with returning strength, wiser thoughts have come, and henceforward I abandon all ideas of ambition.”

“Would that you had never told me this!” exclaimed the Earl, with deep and visible emotion; “for, unhappily, your decision comes too late.”

“And why?” asked the Countess breathlessly; “surely he is at liberty to change his mind?”

“I wish that it were indeed so;” was the

gloomy reply ; “ but, as a man of honour and stability, he is no longer his own master. Both his word and my own are pledged. Nothing either can or ought to enable him to evade his engagement. You are well aware, Ferdinand, how strenuously I endeavoured to dissuade you from your purpose, although it was my duty to inform you that the appointment had been offered to you by the Queen ; and as you resisted alike my entreaties and my arguments, you have now no alternative but to abide by the consequences of your own precipitancy. Nay more, you are to present yourself at the Foreign Office within eight-and-forty hours.”

“ It is then decided ; ” said Marston with a bitter smile ; “ that I am again to become an exile.”

“ But surely,” once more interposed the Countess ; “ there must be some method of releasing him from this engagement ? ”

“ None ; ” said the Earl decisively ; “ a man of honour and delicacy can only pursue one course in such a case ; and therefore, as his hours here are numbered, we have only to make such arrangements as may tend to render his sojourn at Berlin both pleasant and profit-

able to him. Moreover," he added, in a voice so low and unsteady that it startled both his hearers; "I have yet more to tell you." And as he spoke, he swept his hand across his brow, and a pained expression passed over his face.

In an instant he recovered himself; and placing a pen in the hand of Marston, he said,—

"You shall now be my amanuensis, Ferdinand, as you were some months ago; and, perhaps, for the last time. Write to my dictation:—

" ' To his Excellency the Baron von ———,
Chamberlain to His Majesty the King of Prussia, &c.

" ' MY DEAR BARON,

" ' Our old and tried friendship encourages me, even although so many years have elapsed since we last met, to request that you will confer upon me a new favour in addition to the many others for which I am your debtor. A mutual regard and esteem, which have borne the test of more than thirty years, make us brothers in heart, although we are not so in land or language; and, judging you, as I have every right to do, by myself, I have no

fear that either time or absence has succeeded in weakening those feelings. In this full conviction, therefore, I address myself to you, under circumstances so peculiar, and so important to my happiness, that I would intrust my secret to no other friend on earth.' ”

Lord Ravenswood paused; his agitation increased; but as the Countess would have spoken, he signed to her to be silent; and after a severe internal struggle, he resumed,—

“ ‘ Mr. Greville-Marston has just been appointed by Her Britannic Majesty *attaché* to the English embassy at your court.’—— Have you written this, Ferdinand?”

“ I have, my lord.”

“ Continue then.”

“ ‘ You will wonder that in asking your protection and friendship for this gentleman, I should have prefaced my request by so solemn an appeal, not only to your regard, but also to your discretion; but you will cease to do so when you learn ——’ ”

Again the Earl was silent for a moment; and his eyes wandered like those of one in a

dream from his wife to Marston, and back again to his wife ; who, with her gaze fastened upon him, sat motionless.

“ ‘ When you learn,’ faltered out the trembling voice ; ‘ that Mr. Greville-Marston is my son —— ’ ”

The pen fell from the hand of Ferdinand ; and the Countess sank back with a faint groan upon the cushions of the sofa.

“ *Your son !* ” exclaimed the unhappy young man ; “ did I hear you aright ? Did you say that I was your son ? ”

His distended eye-balls and convulsed and quivering lips struck despair to the heart of Lord Ravenswood.

“ My child, my child, forgive me ! ” he murmured, as he extended his arms to the wretched young man. “ I know, I feel that I have deeply wronged you ; but have pity on my grey hairs.”

Marston did not move a limb.

“ Now I am, indeed, punished ; ” said the soul-stricken father ; “ now, indeed, I am compelled to blush before my own wife, before my own son, and neither will show me mercy. Ferdinand, listen to me ; ” he pursued, with a sudden energy even more ter-

rible to witness than his previous despair. "I am now paying—how dearly, I alone can tell—the price of my own want of moral courage; but as year after year went by, and I was more able to appreciate your nice sense of honour, your inflexible integrity, your horror of every deviation from those high principles which formed the basis of your character; and which, contradictory as it may seem, it had been my dearest pride to cultivate, I shrank before the ordeal to which I have this day been subjected. I could not brook either your reproaches or your contempt; and thus I thought to guard my bitter secret, until I could say, 'Forgive a dying father, Ferdinand, and let me not go into the grave without one last embrace from my own and only son.' We are about to part, and perhaps for ever; will you refuse to be equally generous now?"

And once more he stretched out his arms to the agonised and conscience-smitten Ferdinand; who, with a wild cry that echoed through the room, threw himself upon his breast.

Little did Lord Ravenswood suspect, as he clasped his son to his heart almost convulsively, the pangs which his words had

inflicted ; little did he suspect that it was not his shame, but his own, that Ferdinand felt so keenly, and was expiating so deeply. How did the tortured spirit yearn to cry out in its agony, " Forgive me also, my father, for I have greatly sinned ! " but even this poor consolation was denied him, for *his* secret involved another even as deeply as himself.

To have mentally wronged his benefactor was enough, more than enough. But his father ! To discover that he was the son of the man whom he had honoured and respected above all other men. To find that—instead of being the offspring of the delinquent Captain Greville, whose memory was tarnished by crime, and whose children must inherit his disgrace, let it be concealed as it might ; and to preserve whose memory from infamy he had sacrificed every hope and every happiness of his own life—he was the child of one who, whatever might have been his youthful frailties, was still the very soul of honour and probity, was too much, and crushed him to the earth. How had he repaid the care and tenderness of such a parent ? By sowing his hearth with ashes, and alienating from him, as he believed for ever, the affection of his wife.

The tale which the Earl had to tell when both father and son had recovered sufficient composure to converse, was, unhappily, a too common one. Not feeling himself, owing to his pecuniary embarrassments, in a position to marry, Lord Ravenswood had formed a *liaison* with a handsome widow who was the mother of Marston, and who had now been dead for many years. Anxious to conceal a circumstance so totally at variance with his general character and principles, he had explained his dilemma to his much less scrupulous aide-de-camp, who had instantly offered to take charge of the boy, and to allow him to bear his name. The death of Mrs. Greville, which occurred when Ferdinand was four years of age, removed the only impediment to this arrangement; and the two children (for Enna was in truth the child of Captain and Lady Charlotte Greville) being too young to comprehend the singularity of the circumstance, were soon taught to look upon each other as brother and sister; while we have seen how nobly the Earl repaid, by his affectionate care of Enna, the obligation which had been conferred upon him by her father.

We will not dwell upon the feelings of

either Lord Ravenswood or his son during this narration ; the Countess meanwhile neither moved nor spoke. The iron had entered into *her* soul also ; the veil which passion had flung over her fault was torn away for ever ; and she saw it in all its hideous deformity at last. The shock was too sudden and too terrible ; and as Marston was folded to his father's breast, she fainted.

CHAPTER XXIV.

CONCLUSION.

TEN years ! Two little words, and yet how long a period to live and to endure ! And what had passed in those ten years with the actors in our little drama ? The Earl was gathered to his ancestors, but neither unwept nor unhonoured. The Countess, deeply conscious of her own error, yielded a ready pardon to his ; and his passage to the grave was smoothed by the devotion of a zealous and repentant wife, who, having religiously confessed her fault, had no longer any aim in life save to expiate and to repair it. The birth of a son, who had attained his sixth year when he succeeded to his father's name and honours, formed a last and blessed link between the two who had been so long estranged in heart ; and invested existence with a new and happy interest for his widowed

mother. What mattered it that her luxuriant hair was streaked with grey, and that a settled melancholy had divested her fair young face—for she was still young, and still beautiful—of the radiant charm of her earlier years? The grace and dignity of a soul at peace with itself were there; and never had she looked more lovely. As the tempest of the morning clears the mid-day sky of the vapours which had threatened to overcharge it, so had her early trials purified and chastened her heart. To say that she never dwelt upon the past would be to advance a fallacy, and to endue human nature with a strength which it does not, and never can, possess; but she looked back upon it as on a feverish and troubled dream, from which she had awakened to a just appreciation of the real value of the man to whom she had given her hand, and to whose generous forgiveness she was indebted for her after-peace.

Let none blame her for her confession, as, kneeling childlike before him, she opened her whole heart. Had *he* hesitated to intrust *her* with his humiliating secret? And did not his noble confidence compel her own? The worldling may scoff, and the cynic sneer,

but a noble nature will at once comprehend and appreciate the effort which she thus made to enter upon "the strait and narrow way" of rectitude and truth.

What could Marston henceforth be to her, or she to Marston?

Only a day elapsed after the disclosure, a day spent in tears, and upon her knees, when the following letter was despatched to Berlin:—

"MY DEAR FERDINAND,

"With the permission of your father I address to you a few parting words. He knows our secret, and weeps over it even as we ourselves have done. We must now strive to forget the past. The path of duty lies broad before us. You, I trust, will tread it long and nobly; for one of the best blessings of my future life will be to feel that I shall only have passed across it like a shadow, not rested upon it as a blight. Let me hear of you as respected, honoured, and beloved; as, in short, the worthy son of him to whom we both owe so much. You will not think that I write coldly or heartlessly: I could not if I would; but while I look back with terror, I am resolved to look forward with hope. Should

we ever meet again, may it be as those who are united by a bond of relationship too sacred to be forgotten, even for an instant."

That her letter remained unanswered excited no surprise in the mind of the Countess. That Marston had previously left the Castle without even the ceremony of a leave-taking had seemed to her equally natural; the gulf which yawned between them was no longer garlanded with flowers, but lay revealed in all its depth, and breadth, and darkness; all sophistries were silenced now; all self-deception at an end: and both had only to turn away from the abyss, thankful that their footsteps had not failed upon its edge.

Marston is now a statesman of no mean repute—a hard, dry, unsympathetic, methodical man of business; celebrated for the pungency of his satire, and the sincerity of his principles. No one ever sees him smile, or cares to claim him as a friend; but all respect him for his integrity of purpose, and his uncompromising uprightness of character. For him the romance of life is over, and its reality is all in all.

How often do we elbow such men as we

jostle on through the by-ways of the world, without suspecting how they once felt, and struggled, and suffered ! How seldom do we remember that the human heart, like the water filtered through the fissures of a metallic mine, must give out drop by drop ere it can harden into stone !

Of the minor actors in our tale a few words only need be said. The Baroness von Hartheim, having succeeded in enforcing precedence over her sister, soon learnt to pardon all the insults of the past, and to sympathise with her in her sorrows ; not the least poignant of which were the death of her husband and the non-appearance of Arthur to claim his inheritance. She knew not of the lone and blood-stained grave in the far-off Californian wilds.

Mrs. Carlyon, in happy ignorance of the fatal secret by which the life of Ferdinand had been wrecked, still lives on loving and beloved, and quite ready to assert that such a husband and such a brother have fallen to the lot of few women on earth. Nor does she speak unadvisedly ; for while Carlyon, although so many years married, is still as warm in his affection, and as zealous in his

care of his lovely wife as in the earliest months of their union, Marston has been careful, by an increase of liberality and kindness, to prevent all suspicion that he had usurped a place in her heart to which he was not entitled ; and " Uncle Ferdinand " is a household word often on the lips of his adopted son and namesake, one day to be his heir.

And what of those other shadows which have flitted across our page ? They share the common vicissitudes of life without any of those distinctive trials or struggles which afford scope to the pen of the chronicler. Clouds and sunshine, joy and sorrow, are the lot of all ; and happy are they who do not, by yielding to their passions, when they should be guided by their principles, counteract the beneficent designs of that all-gracious Being who has implanted in the heart of each one of his creatures a deep sense of its responsibility both towards God and man.

THE END.

